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## (Re)structuring communication and the social capital of religious organizations

*This paper examines the relationships between Internet and social capital building within religious organizations, which are relatively understudied foci. Building upon theoretical insights provided by new institutionalism and recent research on the Internet, social capital and religion, this article explores the ways in which religious organizations have (re)structured their norms, values, and practices of religious community in light of the incorporation of the Internet into their congregational life. Drawing from interviews conducted with Christian and Buddhist religious leaders in Toronto, this article discusses three major relationships in which the effects of the Internet on social capital may be understood, that is, complementary, transformative, and perverse relationships. Religious organizations are traditionally associated with relatively high stocks of social capital, yet findings here suggest that their communicative norms, values, and practices are changing to a varying extent. The results also indicate that the relationship between the Internet and social capital building is largely complementary; however, the Internet is perceived by some to be a 'mixed blessing', facilitating the potential transformation of organizational practices that affect community norms while leading to the dispersion of religious ties that could undermine community solidarity. Thus, contrary to earlier studies that have documented no evidence of innovations involving the reconfiguration of organizational practices and the adjustment of mission or services, findings here illustrate how some religious organizations have expanded the scope of their calling and restructured their communicative practices to spur administrative and operational effectiveness. Like other organizations, religious organizations are not insulated from technological changes including those associated with the Internet. This study clarifies and identifies key ways in which the distinct spirituality, cultural values, and institutional practices and norms of religious*

*organizations influence communication processes that constitute bridging and bonding forms of social capital in this dot.org era of faith.*

**Keywords** Religion; Internet; social capital; religious organizations; world cities

Studies on the social implications of the Internet have recently called for increased attention to two interrelated issues: at the organizational level, it is unclear how new technologies such as the Internet are altering the norms and practices of community and its social structures. At the community level, there is debate as to whether the Internet is contributing to or hindering the development of social capital (Huysman & Wolf 2004). This paper will explore these issues in the context of religious organizations and their role in community building. Specifically, we examine the extent to which Protestant churches and Buddhist temples have acted in response to the challenges and opportunities presented by the incorporation of the Internet into their everyday congregational life. As an asset embedded in norms and networks, the values and resources that result in, and are the product of, socially negotiated relationships, social capital is popularly articulated at the level of the community (Putnam 2000). In this paper, community building is investigated in religious organizations: organized faith-based engagements that are the dominant social form of religion in contemporary societies, as compared with politicized state, social movement or communitarian/individual religion (Beyer 2003). Introduction of the Internet is expected to affect organizational behavior through the reconstitution of cultural norms – a form of social capital (Nee 1998). Here, we explore three models between the Internet and social capital, focusing on the communication processes that constitute congregational life.

The spotlight on religious organizations is also interesting for other reasons. First, in the wake of 9/11 and other social unrests in several world cities, questions concerning religious culture have come to the forefront of international debate and government intervention. Alongside the revitalized attention to religious practices are concerns about transnational communications, and their consequences for community building and cohesion. Second, decline in church attendance has been correlated with a decline in social capital (Putnam 2000). Consequently, the growth of voluntary, faith-based organizations has been recommended to revitalize the fraying fabric of community in contemporary society (Leigh & Putnam 2002). Finally, while they manifest in varying size and degree of stability, religious organizations structure their activities through rules that govern belonging and the assignment of social roles. While organizations are largely maintained through an internal system of norms and values, religious organizations also

possess a distinct spirituality, an 'internal culture' that 'guides the blueprint of their formal structure, favors the meaning of their behaviors, and forms a reservoir of experience that they draw on when making difficult decisions' (Chang 2003, p. 130). Although past literatures have explored the function and administrative complexity of religious organizations, less attention has been paid to the pressures exerted on religious organizational structures arising from newer technologies although there is a small but blossoming field of research in the intersecting area of religion and cyberspace.

Earlier studies have focused on virtual communities and new emerging religions (O'Leary 1996), and the experience of virtual church (Schroeder *et al.* 1998), leaving a research gap in 'the overall social context of cyber-religiosity' (Dawson & Cowan 2004, p. 10). Few studies have compared the cultural dimensions of established religious organizations and their adoption of the Internet under the conditions of contemporary spirituality. This paper attempts to fill the gap in Internet research, especially since religion has been found to outrank politics in importance to individuals in a global survey (Duin 2003), and more people, including regular church-goers, are using the Internet to access religious information and communities (Hoover *et al.* 2004). The next section elaborates on the theoretical framework of the paper, drawn from insights provided by the new institutionalism in economic sociology as well as recent research on the Internet, social capital, and religion.

## **The new institutionalism, social capital and the Internet**

At the heart of the new institutionalism is that institutions are collectively held informal rules and norms that are enforced by group or organizational sanctions (Fligstein 1997). Whereas economic institutionalism under Williamson (1975) emphasizes the role of formal rules in economic governance (e.g. legal contracts), the new institutionalism is more concerned with informal norms that embody the implicit or explicit rules governing group behavior and conformity. Norms are socially constructed to enhance collective social well-being (Nee 1998). Norm production can take place at the macro level where the sources of institutionalism are located outside organizations or it can occur at the micro community level where organizations constitute an important source (Bresser & Millonig 2003). This paper is more concerned with micro-institutionalism – the role of religious organizations in local community building and the effect of the Internet on the latter.

Norms are embedded in social interactions to reduce uncertainty in human interactions and they are maintained through social approval and disapproval (Nee & Ingram 1998). Cultural beliefs that underscore norms are largely supported intra-organizationally by a system of routinized behavior

(Bresser & Millonig 2003). In many instances, organizations impose sanctions to reward cooperative behavior and conformity. In this way, institutions present both a check to and an inspiration for individual action. But, as noted earlier, religious organizations differ from other organizations in that membership is voluntary, and sanctions tend to operate through the psychic, based on a religious authority structure that elicits cooperation and norm production through the satisfaction of divine or spiritual needs which could include a desire for spiritual redemption or deliverance from illness (Chaves 1994). Such an authority structure is reinforced by the clergy and supported by the activities of the congregation (e.g. rituals). When the scope of religious authority declines, this tends to unleash a process of secularization (Chaves 1994). Secularization in turn potentially affects social orders that underscore institutional stability. For this reason, Putnam (1993) has linked the health of communities to religious organizations and the latter's potential for social capital building. As part of the structure that supports the social order of a community, the social interactions of religious leadership and laity can contribute to increased associational engagement and thereby social capital. Forces of secularization, on the other hand, potentially erode social capital and cohesion through the undermining of religious norms.

Although the concept of social capital has been critiqued (Portes 1998), thinking in terms of social capital allows researchers to appraise community and civic engagement (Schueller *et al.* 2000). In particular, Putnam's proposition that social capital is built through encouraging voluntary associations has been prominent. Putnam highlights the varied roles of 'bridging' and 'bonding' social capital towards the goals of community building (Putnam 2000). Bridging social capital concerns the voluntary associations based on common interests that transcend heterogeneous differences of religion, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, whereas bonding social capital refers to the exclusive social relationships that people build around homogeneity (Putnam 2000).

Given that norms are internalized in organizations, including religious organizations, responses to external pressures vary among organizations. The development of the Internet constitutes an important external pressure on religious organizations' internal system of norms and values (Huysman & Wulf 2004). Prior research has highlighted how the Internet may provide 'social affordances' for participatory democracy (Wellman *et al.* 2003), virtual community formation (Rheingold 2000), and grass roots advocacy to prompt civic engagement (Naughton 2001).

Because the new institutionalism emphasizes the role of social interactions in the construction of norms, Internet use among religious communities may be expected to facilitate the transformation of various dimensions of religious interactions that in turn influence social capital building processes. Three major relationships are proposed to explain the effects of

the Internet on social capital. According to Quan-Haase and Wellman (2004), the Internet may supplement, transform, or diminish social capital. Their framework is modified here to examine religious community and organizational relationships. Under the first (complementary) and second (transformative) models, the relationship between the Internet and social capital is expected to be positive. However, while the relationship is complementary in the first model, suggesting that the Internet will expand prevailing dimensions of religious communication by increasing the density of existing patterns of contact between religious authorities and congregational members, the second model is transformative in that the impact of the Internet is likely to result in the reconstitution of prevailing religious authoritative norms possibly bringing about organizational changes. In the last model, a more perverse and negative relationship may be expected since the Internet decreases local network density and facilitates the rise of virtual communities. Quan-Haase and Wellman (2004) report that the majority of studies on Internet and community building tend to support the 'complementary' relationship model. Prior research on the voluntary sector also show that despite the potential of electronic networking to promote an organizational metamorphosis, there was an absence of innovations involving technologies where external relationships were reconfigured, internal processes were reshaped and missions were expanded (Burt & Taylor 2001). We might therefore expect that the Internet will be predominantly used to support communication in present religious organizational forms that contribute to the reinforcement of cultural values and norms.

However, the relationship between social capital and the Internet may be changing given the increasing incorporation of the Internet into people's lives. Moreover, the aforementioned three relationships may not be as distinctive or clearly recognized within religious organizations as social capital manifests in different cultural specific forms. Huysman and Wulf (2004) recommend that an analysis of the relationship between the Internet and social capital adopt a sociotechnical perspective, which considers how organizational and political factors co-construct the process of technological incorporation and change (e.g. Loader *et al.* 2000). In accordance with this, some researchers have argued that religious congregations can grant the Internet religious legitimacy. For instance, research conducted on Christian email communities illustrates how the Internet is viewed by some as a 'sacramental space' (Campbell 2005). Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai (2005) also stress the nature of 'cultured technology' where the Internet was shaped by religious elites of an ultra-orthodox Jewish community who used the Internet to maintain, or even reinforce, the fundamental values and social hierarchy of their community. Moreover, even within religious groups, the meaning of technology is mediated by the politics of local conditions. Kluver and Cheong (2007) report a diversity of views expressed on technological modernization,

Internet adoption, and secularization processes by religious leaders between five religions as well as within each religious tradition in Singapore. As such, in contrast to the belief that technological modernization leads to secularization, local context may dynamically modify the perception of the Internet such that it becomes highly valued within the institution over time.

As discussed, the new institutionalism highlights the importance of symbolic processes within organizations as organizational structures arise from a need to conform to the myths and rituals that define institutionally legitimate behavior and norms. In the religious context, it is expected that the organizational identity and culture shape the selective strategies about technological innovation, which may potentially lead to new organizational forms. In light of scarce research on religion within the context of contemporary society, this study explores how religious leaders perceive the Internet and its role in social capital building and the ways in which religious organizations are using the Internet. The secondary purpose of this article is to compare the ways in which Christian and Buddhist religious organizations perceive and use cyberspace for their religious missions and social capital building.

## Method

The research context covers the metropolitan area of Toronto, Canada. Toronto is ideal for the study since Canada has one of the highest rates of Internet usage (68 percent) in the world (Internet World Stats 2006) and 73.5 percent of households in Toronto have access to the Internet. By 2002, nearly all federal and provincial government institutions were using the Internet, and 95 percent of them had a website. Computerization is widespread and Internet connectivity is ubiquitous in schools (Statistics Canada 2003). In addition, as a city of more than 2.5 million peoples, and new immigrants of varying religions (Census 2001, Statistics Canada), Toronto affords the opportunity to examine local and transnational community building activities among and within Christian Churches and Buddhist Temples.

This study drew upon in-depth interviews with religious leaders that were conducted as part of a larger project, which included direct observations of religious services, as well as a website analysis of the religious organizations to provide contextual data from different perspectives (Yin 1994). Given the exploratory nature of the study, qualitative research is particularly helpful in uncovering the 'how' and 'why' behind technological adoption and the changes in organizational communication overtime (Fitch 1994).

Interviewees were selected from the sample of religious organizations in Toronto found to have a website from the 2000 edition of the Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches, the BuddhaNet Buddhist Directory of Centers and Temples and the Yellow Pages. The interviews included 20

Christian and five Buddhist leaders, which represented about a quarter of the respective religious organizations with a website. Interviews were completed between September and November 2005, via face to face or the telephone as per the preference of the participants. Generalizability is not sought with this sample; instead in-depth interviews provide the advantages of 'thick descriptions' (Geertz 1973) and valued detail for the analysis of actual micropractices in organizations (Waitzkin 1993). The interview protocol was focused on the Internet and religion and interviewees were first asked to describe their use of the Internet and then asked about their views on Internet and social capital building. Many religious leaders also provided background materials, including newsletters and books when asked. Interview sessions typically lasted 40 minutes and were audio taped. The project arranged for a 50-dollar honorarium, which was given to the participants or donated to a charitable organization of their choice. The interviews were then transcribed in full for textual analyses as well as the use of verbatim quotations for reporting the research (Barone & Switzer 1995) and subjected to thematic analysis using The Ethnograph software, version 5.0 for qualitative analysis.

## Results

### *Communication, the Internet and social capital*

Social capital is articulated in the social relations between persons in a community, and religious communities tend to be associated with a relatively high stock of social capital (Park & Smith 2000). Here we elaborate on the nature of the relationships between Internet and social capital building among these communities, which may take the forms of a complementary, transformative, or perverse relationship. While all three 'models' of relationships may be observed, the majority of the responses from Christian pastors were aligned with the complementary relationship model.

### *Complementary relationship*

Most Christian leaders interviewed said they used the Internet to augment their contact with their colleagues, council members, ministry workers, congregational members, as well as missionary partners abroad. Specifically, the most popular form of online communication was email, used for 'administrative purposes' and 'internal communication'. Several pastors commented that they used email 'on a daily basis', and 'significantly to arrange meetings, make decisions, get information out'. One senior pastor with a staff of 14 ministers and administrators said:

Definitely the way that business is conducted, like scheduling the meetings and the notices sent out all that if you send a message each day and think that people are going to get it and respond to it so it seems to be quick to link up and advise different people in that way.

Compared with financial, education or government organizations, religious organizations are commonly perceived to be technological 'laggards' and resistant to change. Thus interestingly, it was observed that electronic communication had become the predominant form of communication in some churches, increasingly more popular as compared with face-to-face communication or the telephone. In fact, several campuses were recently renovated to 'go wireless'. Electronic communication was generally perceived to be 'more efficient', 'faster' and 'more convenient'. One pastor said that it has 'virtually replaced any other form of written communication'. Another pastor explained how email communication was incorporated into the church's existing hierarchical communication chain, 'from the senior pastor to the leaders of various ministries to the councilors' of the church. Another said:

Before, we called the people or we got to tell the people making announcements after service, please come to the library or by the piano to see what times were best for everybody... Now, most of them I think 90 percent of the meetings are set up through email, maybe some by phone call.

These examples illustrate how the Internet is increasingly valued as indispensable in religious organizational life. Besides communication between the religious and ministry leaders, the Internet is also being utilized for 'pastoral care'. Several religious leaders stated that email was used for community building via prayer support networks and for sending encouraging inspirational messages:

When members of our congregation are going through a really difficult situation, we use the email not only to announce it but in a sense to encourage people to be involved in prayer around the number of reflections.

Just yesterday one of the members of the church said that they haven't seen a particular member in church for the last couple of weeks, a guy wondered if everything is OK with that person so he had sent me an email and just pushed the response button and said 'Hey, I have missed you in church the last couple of weeks, is everything OK?' So, I can



find that certain level of pastoral care or communication and fellowship can be had by the Internet.

In addition to facilitating fellowship, one pastor related how they had utilized email to mobilize their congregation to remodel the church:

We have a young guy in our congregation with three little kids had a freak accident and broke his neck and so we are going to gather the congregation and we are going to use the Internet . . . we are going to retrofit the church to make it wheelchair accessible, we are going to do a fund raiser to help them pay for his rent and their groceries and so the Internet makes it easier to do that kind of stuff.

Notwithstanding Putnam's (2000) claim that the rise of mass media, including the Internet, is causing a decline in civic life through the displacement of associational activities, the interviews above suggest rather that the Internet can help strengthen bonding social capital by encouraging spiritual support among religious believers. In another case, associational engagement is translated into increased civic life through participation in events outside the church where a pastor related how a member's email sparked his interest in a 'Promise Keepers' conference, which he eventually got other men from his church to attend. Many ministers have also recommended websites, which they thought were 'very useful for Apologetics, which means giving a reason for the faith'.

Therefore, what seems to be apparent in the complementary relationship model is the role of the Internet in strengthening bonding social capital through increased connections to religious organizational activities. From the point of view of the cognitive dimension of social capital, shared narratives are necessary in order to routinize codes and behavior that in turn strengthen community norms (Nahapiet & Goshal 1998). Furthermore, connectivity transcends local geography since members are able to stay connected beyond their immediate vicinities. Several pastors explained the changing nature of religious missionary work and one said:

I had a pastor at seminary. He was an older man and he remembers the days when a letter from missionary in China would take six weeks to arrive and now missionaries can send out these things immediately and across the world. . . From that sense of immediacy we feel more connected immediately with what is going on in the churches, with the other parts of the world.

Echoing the importance of local conditions in Internet use, several pastors also explained how cultural and economic conditions in Toronto have shaped

the significance of online communication for building bonding social capital. A pastor said his members 'come by the church' but 'for the most part they don't see each other after Sunday morning'. Hence, instead of physical house visits, he thinks that more people 'welcome contact via emails'. He explained:

I was at a previous parish that was more rural, in a small town and people would have been wounded if I would have emailed them instead of coming by. There was a greater social expectation that the pastor would come by the house and visit and that is completely reversed in this urban context, where people would be happy to hear from me through an email and happy to maintain that connection in a steadfast way, but are suspicious and surprised if I would come and visit them in person.

In some cases, online communication has become the only viable form of communication for maintaining ties with members who increasingly travel, as some pastors explain:

I'm in a very mobile congregation where people travel a lot. So one of the uses of that is so people feel quite connected to their congregation, because every Friday morning at 10 o'clock they know they are going to get an electronic newsletter and they pick it up whether they are away, or with their families. We have a couple of families that are living in B.C., a family that lived in Europe for the year. We have business people who travel all over the world that it's astonishing to me how many business cooperate types in London at some meeting would log on Friday morning and will get the newsletter because it keeps them connected to the community.

Almost all of our major finance team, members of the board and other committees besides board meetings, all of it is handled through emails and attachments. I have people who are involved with the church that travel extensively and I can communicate with them anytime anywhere, via the Internet. Some of them have Blackberries and makes communication amazingly easy compared to the telephone.

One pastor elaborated on how she redesigned the webpage of her church's website to specifically cater to congregational members who travel but still want to stay connected to the church. She said:

I wanted them to feel that there were a part of it even if they couldn't physically be here. That's why I'm putting all the stained glass windows up [on the website]... If they can't make communion they

can listen to the sermon MP3 on the net, because I upload them, do all the sound editing. . . So if they miss a sermon, we have people that travel, they can be in their hotel room, in Sri Lanka . . . and still feel part of the church.

Hence, overall in the complementary relationship model, the Internet facilitates bonding social capital by thickening community-based connections among church leaders and members. Such associational activities potentially strengthen organizational networks, which are valuable for reinforcing the normative dimensions of social capital.

### *Transformative relationship*

While the complementary relationship model does not indicate dramatic changes in social interactions, the transformative relationship model reveals normative re-configurations that lead to new organizational practices. Among some Buddhists, this has led to the rise of 'E-Buddhism'. The case of one of the largest Buddhist temples in Toronto is instructive. According to the founding priest, since the advent of the Internet, he has 'changed his mission totally as a priest' and he has been 'running the temple in a totally different way' such that the members 'have to communicate through e-mail' as he and his staff do not call their members. The temple grounds are wireless and the temple also owns a web radio so that people can listen to their sermons online. He said:

Before I had Internet access, almost everything in my life I would find it so time consuming. In case I would have to visit somebody or that person would have to come to me . . . but now since I started using the Internet I would save time so I could help more people. Sometimes I would also minister to the sick using the Internet. In parallel to Christian's Tele-evangelism, we use the 'e-dharma'.

He described how he is online for at least four hours daily to mentor his disciples; 'connect with students who find it extremely hard to come to my temple so they would use the Internet to chat or they would ask me questions and I would answer them right away'. In this case, the Internet transforms social capital building as it functions as the sole means of contact among the temple members:

Interestingly enough I have some members from other countries that I have never seen. I call them 'e-members' because these members are from the Internet. These are members of my temple or followers

whom I have never seen and they have never seen me. So for me, the Internet is the only source for this type of interconnection.

In another temple, the priest said her temple was promoting 'web-coaching' 'to have one-on-one instruction without distance being such a factor' since about 10 percent of her members live as far away as Singapore and Australia. Disciples enter into an 'interactive chat with a priest, chat rooms where teachers can share notes, meditation coaching through emails once a month, teachers respond back to you additional one-on-one through emails'. To further engage believers, her temple produced six live webcasts last year and conducted 'prayer globally'. These examples illustrate how Buddhist temples are increasingly embedded in digital networks and how Internet use helps to broaden the organizations' membership networks by bridging social capital across ethnic lines, in this case by enrolling members from foreign countries.

Furthermore, under the transformative model, the Internet has become an important promotional tool. One Buddhist priest said they have 'more people on the mailing list than active members', as their 'website is the largest PR vehicle', 'where '80 percent of people from Open House come through the website.' In fact, the Internet was considered so crucial in the mission of the temple that last year, C\$10,000 was spent to hire a consultant to increase the temple's web presence and improve their rankings on Google:

We hired an expert in this area, to give us guidance and we found out that there are a few different things that decide where you're ranked in Google and other search engines ... so we have changed our website and specific pages to have keywords at the top of the page, so someone can go directly to that page, and also the number of links coming in and out of the site... Now if you search for Toronto Meditation Classes, you will see us in the top 10.

Beyond promotion, other transformative elements were articulated by religious leaders who said they were increasingly confronted with challenges arising from increased participation by their local and virtual members. Religious organizations manifest their power through an internal culture of rules, sanctioned by religious authorities and their interpretations of moral behavior. However, the traditional monopoly of religious knowledge may be eroding, resulting in flatter hierarchies where participants challenge religious interpretations while socially reconstructing the norms of religious authority. One pastor likened the Internet to the printing press, which was perceived to be 'anti-authoritarian' because it weakened the authoritative role of religious leaders. Another pastor said:

I'll get a email from God knows where and they'll say that I was reading your sermon on such and such and I disagree with what you say, but it troubles me a bit that there are people with nothing better to do than read sermons from Toronto Canada but if people want to get into a discussion about it, its fine.

Some interviewees viewed the potential reconstitution of religious structures favorably because it promotes wider social capital building. For instance, a pastor of a United Methodist Church credited the Internet for producing alternative centers of knowledge as 'the mass media, TV and radio, are so religiously dominated by the right' that the Internet becomes an avenue to hear 'less reactionary' voices.

Finally, the Internet also facilitates the transformation of social capital in religious organizations by changing the nature of organizational resources and the latter's accessibility. In one instance, members are referred to websites for interactive counseling on potentially sensitive issues:

I heard somewhere that over 50 percent of men are dealing with Internet pornography and that is in and out of the church as well. And I will quote that in my sermons and say, hey look if you are dealing with, there is a certain website 'settingcaptivefree.com' and that website is for both adults and teens and they will link you up with a personal counselor and it is like a 50 day web-course and there is an accountability partner on the other side and they will help them, and that has helped quite a few people.

In other instances, the Internet is encouraged as a resource for inter-faith engagements. Some leaders view such engagements to be positive in the context of pluralistic societies like Toronto for building bridging social capital. One pastor said his members have checked the meanings of Jewish holidays online, as their campus is in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood. Another Buddhist priest likened the Internet to 'an open door' for interfaith dialogue.

In sum, the transformative model indicates that the Internet has stimulated positive changes among religious organizations by creating new forms of communication (especially within Buddhist organizations), including new relationships between religious leaders and members by establishing a more central place for the Internet in organizational activities.

### *Perverse relationship*

At the heart of proponents of social capital is the instrumental argument that community members, by virtue of their engagement with group members,

will create resources that enhance both individual and community welfare. Coleman (1990) further suggests that dense social networks are a necessary condition for the emergence of social capital. However, under the perverse relationship model, the Internet is seen to have a negative impact by substituting real time, physical relations with more virtual engagements. Hence religious leaders expressed concern that certain members may not recognize the limitations of electronic communication. For example, one pastor stressed that email is 'not the ideal' and is 'limiting' as one needs to 'work through other means to keep the personal relationship alive'. Another pastor explained why electronic communication 'is effective for information but not to deal with issues'. He said:

religion is a personal matter for people and so much connected to people's emotions; most of what happens on the Internet connects through the exchange of data and information. So it works well to schedule a meeting next Tuesday at 2 o'clock, it works less well to discuss the fact that someone feels guilty because they did something that they shouldn't have done, it works less well for exploring the depth of human experience.

Yet despite the perceived inferiority of electronic communication, multiple pastors acknowledged that it was difficult to sustain community without it because relational values have changed. Some leaders articulated how external pressures of social and technical change have gradually influenced their behavior and one said:

The danger of course, in an increasing impersonal society, is that we just respond to each other by words and emails. Church is fellowship, the communion of the same, and although a certain level of communion of the same fellowship can be had by sharing email, sharing certain burdens, like 'pray for me in this', nothing substitutes for real life sitting down in small groups and in the larger worship context and having fellowship that way.

Past research has debated the nature of virtual community with regard to its authenticity, with some regarding virtual communication as a meaningful forum while others see it as a form of pseudo-community (Jones 1997). Among the leaders interviewed, most regarded face-to-face contact as the only form of 'real community'. As one pastor puts it:

It is all very well to keep all of the information available but the real support comes by showing up. Some old guy sitting by himself banging

away on the Internet, he would do far more good if he would show up and have a cup of coffee with somebody. Human contact is still essential.

Another pastor metaphorically described the loss of commitment to a 'local living body' as a 'tenuous or balloon relationship'. He said that believers needed to be 'rooted' in specific local houses of worship:

[the] downside is that it leads to a sense of rootlessness or placelessness where people don't locate themselves to this congregation at this time or place, they tend to float a bit and see themselves as citizens of the world rather than citizens here.

A few pastors were more ambivalent about the efficacy of online community building but were resistant to fully endorsing the practice of mediated faith. They said:

It is rare that, I am not saying that it is impossible. . . I think of it like a nicotine patch, to go online and chat with others to receive some comfort from that but think it is unsatisfying.

Might happen but at the heart of Christian faith it is highly, highly relational. Eating your juice and cookie in front of the TV doesn't take the place of the Eucharist or Holy Communion. It is really the real flesh and blood people around you that really matter.

However, a handful of leaders denounced online faith communities as weak, if not sacrilegious. Of utmost concern was the migration to religiously focused chat rooms and email communities away from local houses of worship. Aligned with the Durkheimian function of religion as a cohesive and vitalizing practice, a few stressed the importance of performing mass rituals in person to reap the distinctive benefit of church community:

A church should be a more interactive thing. We build into our ritual that there are readings that the pastor reads something and the congregation reads back. We have singing, which is important because in order to sing you have to listen to the other guy sing and match yourself to it. These are community building exercises and they are an integral process. But if you are sitting at home watching a congregation sing, it turns into watching TV. . . You are not participating.

To undo the negative effects of the Internet on social capital building, one Buddhist priestess related how her temple reversed its online policy and now mandates all followers to come to their center to meditate:

We used to have our all meditations online . . . so a newcomer to this web page could go online, download the meditation and go home and do it themselves. However, they have to take all this meditation off because we ended up having a lot of people trying them out never coming to the center and getting the wrong ideas about it.

In the case of this temple, online meditation was seen as 'problematic' because the tradition is focused on 'oral transmissions' of scripture and belief that 'the growth cannot happen without seeing the teacher in person':

Our centers we cannot grow reading, we do have to come to the center, interact with the people. Shake their hands, pour the water, create that power flow within each person, so one can actually hurt themselves doing the methods improperly. . . It's really sad when someone decides to read and read online because it is available so the negative part of it is people fail to see the point that people have to come to the center... You do have to make that drive . . . the center is really where the power field is.

She also explained how a male seeker once found their center online and decided to visit but later complained about the center's 'open, playful' practices as he was expecting a more solemn meditation space. In a way, her anecdote illustrates the gap between expected norms of online seekers, and those of religious organizations, and how the former may be disappointed by actual enactments of religious rituals.

Given the relative recency of the Internet, a handful of pastors also raised the issue of the susceptibility of their congregation to online gaming, gambling, and pornography addictions. In particular, they mentioned their concern with youths whom they perceive to 'lack fundamental social skills' as 'their minds are filled with images that are not conducive to forming healthy relationships'. One said:

Some of these younger generations are having a tough time talking to people face to face. In my former church, I had some teens that would purposely email me with false names because they would mention to me that they were afraid to talk to me face to face. . . I mean people are having such a tough time in forming a community and knowing what I call 'proper fellowship'.

Finally, several leaders expressed how information presented online may be misinterpreted, and how online communication presents a greater potential for conflict when people choose to 'flame' others, place 'heresy' about their religions online, and believe in certain 'off-the wall organizations' who are 'abusing religion'. One pastor explained that the drawback is



'anyone can put a site together' for religious purposes, even though they are not trained in scripture. He echoed the sentiments of other leaders who expressed how challenging it was to find time to deal with members' enquiries on particular websites. Specifically, he related how he had to counsel a member who was upset that the church did not use the King James Version of the Bible and instead used the New International Version as this member had read websites reporting that versions besides the KJV are 'heresies and imperfection'. He said:

I mean if people are starting to incorporate things that are completely alien to Christianity, because they read it on a web page that is troubling and brings into question my role as an interpreter and teacher to my congregation.

Hence, in contrast to the earlier transformative relationship where the Internet is thought to decrease the monopoly of social control on religious knowledge, the perverse relationship suggests that there is concern about the potential loss of social control. As Portes (1998) has pointed out, social control is a major function of social capital because it provides a mechanism by which norms are enforced. To the extent that religious authority norms are being challenged by changing expectations and interactions arising from online as opposed to physical community life, the perverse relationship model indicates that the Internet can potentially reduce social capital with negative implications for community building.

## Conclusion

Like other organizations, Protestant churches and Buddhist temples are not insulated from technological changes including those associated with the Internet. This paper has discussed and documented the influence of the Internet on the social capital of religious organizations by focusing on their communication patterns and processes. We examined the above effects in terms of three relationships that relate the Internet to self-reinforcing or slow increments of social capital accumulation. In general, by providing a medium to access information and to engage in relational activities, the Internet is found to have a positive relationship with social capital. The complementary model, which was most popularly found among the Christian organizations interviewed, is characterized by the removal of distal communication barriers, but is additive and evolutionary because its principal effect is to reinforce and grow an existing stock of social capital. With transformative relationships, the Internet has in the cases examined here substituted prevailing forms of social capital building by challenging the nature of social relations

within religious organizations that in turn affects institutional norms. Evidence of social capital re-configuration may be observed through the development of bridging social capital with members outside the local vicinity, and the leveling of traditional religious authority structures as online sermons encourage reciprocal exchanges that are received with greater skepticism, or, through the emergence of alternative centers of religious authorities. In the third and more perverse interpretation, online interactions are thought to promote fluid solidarities that result in less physically connected communities. Here the concern is not only with a corrosion of community ties but also the possibility of a dislocation of members, especially youths, through increased emancipation away from religious organizations. In sum, results here illustrate how the modified conceptual framework of Quan-Haase and Wellman's (2004) relating of the Internet to social capital can yield insights into the fabric of religious community and the potential transformative elements in their organizational life.

Results here also support and illustrate the importance of the sociotechnical perspective in understanding the communication processes within religious organizations as newer media are shaped and judged in light of local values and norms. In this case, local conditions include the faith cultures practiced within religious organizations, the role of religious authorities (sometimes acting as informational gatekeepers and mediators) and the urban conditions in Toronto where countervailing forces of secularization, ubiquitous computing and transnational movements act as further pressures on Internet adoption and use. Clearly, the impact of the Internet on religious organizations is multi-dimensional; the Internet augments community building by introducing new communicative forms that both enrich and extend community life, yet increased online associations do not necessarily always contribute to social capital building with dispersed solidarities. As Schement and Stephenson (1996) note, religion has to be understood in terms of 'endemic tensions' – continuity and change, consumption and worship – that constitute 'unavoidable frictions' in the private and public spheres of religion within the information society. This article presents the situated interactions between the Internet and the social capital from religious leaders of two major world religions in Toronto. Future research could contribute perspectives from religious congregational members in other contexts and among other world religions.

Finally, methodologically, the exploration of organizational spirituality via qualitative research here highlights how religious beliefs and practices may offer powerful narratives of mission that alternately complement and subvert established organizational culture and control strategies. As Taylor and Trujillo (2001) note, spirituality provides fertile ground for research to increase our understanding of oppositional stories with consequences for the legitimacy of power. Findings from this

article showed how various aspects of new technologies may provide a competing source of knowledge and opportunities to negate, even challenge, religious authority in the practices of 'autonomous selves' (Giddens 1991) and 'consumer religion' in 'glocalized postmodern times' (Lyon 2000). Future research could analyze how narratives on emerging online networking platforms, such as blogs, may further destabilize religious authority and challenge the constitution of religious organizations in this dot.org era of faith.

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