

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Religious Communication and Epistemic Authority of Leaders in Wired Faith OrganizationsPauline Hope Cheong¹, Shirlena Huang², & Jessie P. H. Poon³¹ Hugh Downs School of Human Communication, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ 85287-1205, USA² Department of Geography, National University of Singapore, Singapore 117570, Singapore³ Department of Geography, The State University of New York, Buffalo, NY 14260-1660, USA

The mediation of communication has raised questions of authority shifts in key social institutions. This article examines how traditional sources of epistemic power that govern social relations in religious authority are being amplified or delegitimized by Internet use, drawing from in-depth interviews with protestant pastors in Singapore. Competition from Internet access is found to delocalize epistemic authority to some extent; however, it also reembeds authority by allowing pastors to acquire new competencies as strategic arbiters of religious expertise and knowledge. Our study indicates that although religious leaders are confronted with proletarianization, deprofessionalization, and potential delegitimization as epistemic threats, there is also an enhancement of epistemic warrant as they adopt mediated communication practices that include the social networks of their congregation.

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Claims on the intensification of digital media in daily life have stoked debates on “mediation” (Lievrouw, 2009), including ways that the media “mediate” or assume power by undermining or facilitating shifts in the authority of key social institutions (Hjarvard, 2008). However, as Livingstone (2009) notes, empirical research examining the nature and outcomes of contemporary mediation is slim and still unfolding, “the question of how far the power of traditional authorities has in fact been annexed by the media is an empirical one, as yet unresolved” (p. 7). This article examines how the Internet is implicated in changes in authority, particularly in religious communication. The church has been recognized as a powerful provider of moral orientation, yet Wuthrow (1988) and others note a “restructuring” away from the authority of religious institutions and expertise. In the expanding religious marketplace (Clark, 2007), traditional religious authorities are “losing and to a great degree already have lost—the ability to control their own symbols and the means by which those symbols

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are expressed and communicated” (Hoover, 2007, p. 308). Others directly link the Internet to the loss of religious authority and the erosion of distinctions between elites and laity (e.g., Piff & Warburg, 2005). More recently, Hjarvard (2008) asserts that contemporary media work as agents of religious change transforming both the nature of interactions between members and the authority of religious institutions.

Although authority may be classified into various forms in the mediated age (Campbell, 2007; Herbst, 2003), this article focuses on epistemic religious authority, that is, authority derived through Christian priesthood’s pastoral role as “master–teacher of salvation theology” (Hobgood, 1998) established to provide belief justification of the social order and meaningful interpretation of the ultimate questions of human existence (Berger, 1967). Epistemic authority is understood as a “quality of communication” (Friedrich, as cited in Herbst, 2003, p. 487) linked to exclusive informational access and high status roles involving relevant performances of control over knowledge and skills, including informational control of situations (Meyrowitz, 1985).

Specifically, this article explores how epistemic authority may be changing, and how religious leaders in turn (re)negotiate their epistemic rights, within “religion-online” (Helland, 2000); organized faith-based engagements that are widespread social forms of religion in contemporary global society (Beyer, 2003). The debate on religious authority is embedded in the alleged secularization of (post)modern society in Asian wired societies (Kluver & Cheong, 2007), where spiritual marketplaces abound, religious knowledge, and values are no longer exclusively controlled by elites, and technological modernization and religion coexist as the Internet is shaped by leaders of diverse faiths. The larger context that grounds changes and challenges to authority include on-going discussions on Internet use to fortify grassroots civic networks and facilitate democratic practices (e.g., Dahlgren, 2005; Pickard, 2008). The emancipatory online sphere, however, is dependent on the operationalization of trust that relegitimizes epistemic authority. In this case, online and offline dimensions of trust function to mediate the performance of authority between actors and technologies (Corritore, Kracher, & Wiedenback, 2003) as clergy adapt to the conditions of open religious marketplaces (Finke & Stark, 1992) and minimize the “burdens of legitimation” brought about by technological changes to preserve control and organizational growth (Kertcher & Margalit, 2006).

Drawing from in-depth interviews with protestant church leaders and web-masters in Singapore, a highly wired society and where Christianity is a major religion, we focus on broadening our understanding of religious authority as a line of communication research. This is significant given that religion has recently resurfaced as an important dimension of private and public life, thus research needs to advance beyond this study of sacred texts (Dawson & Cowan, 2004). Moreover, limited attention has been paid to examining the mediated communicative behaviors associated with religious authority even though trends toward proletarianization, deprofessionalization, and potential delegitimization may threaten these learned “beleaguered rulers” (May, 2001). Proletarianization represents the process whereby

organizational and managerial changes divest professions of their work control (Hardey, 2001) and deprofessionalization is associated with increasing lay skepticism and demystification of theological expertise (Dawson & Cowan, 2004). Similarly, delegitimization acts to decrease motivation and trust among members that enable clergy to define the boundaries of normative behavior. Although these processes may have, to some extent, deinstitutionalized the organizational basis by which clergy gain epistemic authority, we suggest that agentic practices through acquisition of new competencies as strategic arbiters of fragmented expertise online, on the other hand, enable leaders to regain the legitimacy and trust necessary to operate in the religious sphere. The next section elaborates on the theoretical framework of this article.

Changing epistemic authority of religious expertise

Religious epistemic authority depends on a system of communication relations that confers on clergy a special role and status in knowledge acquisition of the divine which in turn authorizes them to issue judgments, persuasions, and commands. This presumes the development of a larger social and institutional order that is constituted within a framework of norms, values, and practices (Zelditch, 2001). Normative regulation serves as a source of legitimacy for authority because religious governance is more effective when members trust and believe that clergy are entitled to lead (Tyler, 2006). It also influences clergy legitimacy by ensuring a level of minimum submission. Legitimacy in religious epistemic authority builds on asymmetrical relationships arising from clergy's access and acquisition of specialized knowledge of traditions, theology, and ethics. Communication skills associated with preaching and counseling have become increasingly professionalized as clergy expertise also includes knowledge of organizational management. Hence, scholars have noted that authority that draws its legitimacy from epistemic skills and knowledge is superceding more traditional forms of authority, for example, that which is based on deference to customs or personal charisma (Kruglanski, Pierro, Mannetti, & De Grada, 2006).

Religious expertness is further reinforced when community trust that ensues from members' cognitive beliefs about religious realities supports the validity of clergy judgments and commands. This creates powerful motivations for norm formation, which serves as a source of legitimacy for authority (Tyler, 2006). In turn, legitimacy strengthens normative formation by acting to stabilize authority structures through behavior that is acceptable to a theocentrically defined community. Clergy legitimacy then provides the authorization to comply but the extent to which legitimacy can operate effectively in an age of technological mediation is little known.

Processes of mediation are dialectical in that they can facilitate both the weakening and strengthening of religious authority, although it is more popularly anticipated that authority may be challenged in the same way that earlier visions of online technologies were envisioned as egalitarian. For instance, writing about the move from a print culture to television, Meyrowitz (1985) argued that each defined social situation has roles and rules that are changing as mediated access affects the

information that people bring to and possess in given places. Specifically, “authority is weakened when information systems are merged” (p. 63). That is, diminution of authority ranks occurs when a medium allows access gains on knowledge and social information.

More recently, Hjarvard (2008) proposed that as a consequence of the “mediatization of religion” where media are key distributors of religious content and products, religion is increasingly subsumed under a “media logic” whereby religious activities are interdependent on mediated environments and representations. New media use may facilitate change, and even diminish the perceived stock of knowledge held by elites as many religious texts are found via search engines and on sites such as Biblegateway.com, hyperlinked to commentaries, and webcasts of religious services. For instance, Soukup (2003) observed that 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 “free of external certification and gatekeeping.”

Online interactivity may also allow those lower on the ladder of hierarchy to initiate interactions with others and those of higher status. Aligned with the performance of control and the unequal balance of information, the higher-status person is generally the one to initiate interactions with subordinates (Meyrowitz, 1985, p. 64). Yet with the rise of “online experts” including religious bloggers (Cheong, Halavis, & Kwon, 2008) and “contact us” opportunities on search portals, seekers now have increased channels to initiate counseling conversations, start debates, and even confront leaders with the information that they have obtained online. This, in turn, opens up new spaces of persuasion arising from multiple sources of issuances of authority. The potential loss of clergy autonomy may lead to processes of proletarianization and deprofessionalization (Casey, 1995). Contemporary religious authority may be under threat as new forms of mediated religious communication are changing the ways in which epistemic authority is legitimized, including the reterritorialization of social, spatial, and political religious place (Cheong & Poon, 2008; Cheong, Poon, Huang, & Casas, 2009). Hence, this research strives to answer the following question:

RQ1: In what ways and under what conditions do religious leaders view the Internet as a threat to their epistemic authority or as a resource to promote their faith partnerships?

The dialectical “circulation of meaning” (Silverstone, 1999) suggests that online discursive exchanges are nonlinear because clergy also renegotiate existing authority norms to accommodate others brought on by competition from the Internet (Barzilai-Nahon & Barzilai, 2005; Campbell, 2007). Although the autonomy to prescribe norms may change given countervailing information online, adjustment of social roles may see the development of new competencies. Clergy appear to be expanding their social identity from that of commanders to arbiters of knowledge and encounters both online and offline, a strategy we have termed “strategic arbitration.” When subjected to competitive modes of expertise, relegitimization

entails a justification act (Zelditch, 2001) that supports and restores trust in clergy's epistemic skills. Such strategic arbitration, we suggest, relegitimizes epistemic authority by normalizing information and conduct that are acceptable to the church. By acting as strategic arbiters of fragmented and pluralistic knowledge, leaders engage in purposive issuance of authority that could in turn stimulate desired normative behavior. At the same time, they also retain discretionary agency by dictating the rules of cogovernance that facilitate sense making. This may have the overall effect of reducing resistance. This raises a second question:

RQ2: How do religious leaders script their roles as strategic arbiters to (re)negotiate epistemic control in order to perform under changing religious information architecture?

Methodology

This study draws on data from a larger 3-year multimethod study on religion and Internet use in Asia (Cheong *et al.*, 2009), covering both Buddhist and Christian organizations.¹ This article is based specifically on interviews with 29 Protestant pastors in Singapore from 26 churches (in 3 churches, two leaders were interviewed). They comprised denominations that had been established at different times, for example, the Methodist Church (mainline Protestant, 1885), Assembly of God (charismatic, 1926), Baptists (neo-Calvinist, 1937), and independent churches (established mainly from the 1980s). Their congregational sizes ranged from 50 to 5,000 with one megachurch having a membership of over 25,000. Protestantism not only has some of the strongest web presence in Singapore, but its demographics (younger and English-educated) also mean that the congregants have a greater probability of accessing online religious resources, an important requisite to testing our research questions.

Although we were guided by a national church directory (*A Guide to Churches & Christian Organisations in Singapore 2007–2008* published by Singapore's National Council of Churches), the actual sample was achieved primarily through snowballing, based on referrals by our interviewees. We also had to ensure that all the churches selected had websites (ranging from rudimentary to the sophisticated). All leaders interviewed were male, except for three female pastors. Most interviewees were either the sole or senior minister of the church; the rest were youth ministers. Five of the pastors we interviewed also doubled up as their church's webmaster; we also interviewed 13 webmasters. The interviews were conducted in English and took place between June 2007 and October 2008. Interviews with ministers took place at their churches (two were in cafes) and lasted from 1 to 2 hours. The interviews covered three key areas: Internet use and views on the Internet and Christianity (e.g., information dissemination, community building, trust in, and authority of leaders), ways that they do their work (e.g., leadership changes) and their church's online resources and its website management.

As we seek to understand self-perceptions, the use of self-reporting narratives serves to enhance our understanding of personal and cultural experiences

because meanings of the self and of events are located within specific cultures and times (Gergen, 1991). Apart from the multiple studies that have established the ability of qualitative research to reveal complex subjective experiences, Boston, Mount, Orenstein, and Freedman (2001) have documented the strong potential of qualitative approaches as a means of assessing issues related to the spiritual domain.

A thematic analysis of the interviews was conducted using constant comparative methodology, involving a grounded theory approach (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) where a detailed line-by-line analysis (used) to generate initial categories (with their properties and dimensions) and to suggest relationships among categories is used (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 57). The data were first microanalyzed and classified into emergent categories based on how use of new media, religious communication, and epistemic authority changes appeared to be functioning. After initial data categorization, a constant comparative methodology was used by returning to the data to gain insight into the usefulness of developed categories (Charmez, 2006). Member checking was also conducted in later phases of the fieldwork where emergent categories and information were validated with interviewees. Through this process, development, clarification, and enhancement of categories continued until new observations failed to add significantly to existing categories. Research team members triangulated on their observations, and final categories were annotated and reviewed (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) to assure the quality and verification of the interpretations presented. Such categorization, driven by our conceptual questions, also ensured that quotations selected to represent pastoral viewpoints in the rest of this article reflect convergence and consistency of opinions voiced by our interviewees.²

The Singapore context

As Lai (2008, p. xliii) has observed, Singapore “probably has . . . a full religious spectrum, from orthodox, traditional orientations to reform movements, and independent spiritual clusters,” most of which “have regional and global links and influences.” As part of its commitment to secularism and the safeguarding of racial and religious stability, the government enacted the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act in 1990 (Tan, 2008), arguably to legislate against religious behavior (such as aggressive proselytizing) that can potentially disrupt religious peace.

More specifically, the main Christian churches (such as Methodism and Presbyterianism) were established in Singapore largely in the late 19th and early 20th centuries during her early colonial period (Tong, 2008) thereby making Christianity the “religion of empire” (DeBernardi, 2008, p. 118). Many of the newer denominations were established only after World War II (Tong, 2008), whereas independent churches, including megachurches with Sunday attendances of 10,000 or more, were established mainly in the last 2 decades (DeBernardi, 2008). The last census found that 14.6% of Singaporeans aged 15 years and older, claimed to be Christian,³ up from 10.1% in 1980 (Tong, 2008). Although religious affiliation in Singapore tends to be ethnically

structured to some extent, Christianity is characterized by some degree of “cross-ethnicity,” and Christians in Singapore tend to be younger, more educated, and come from higher-income groups than those from other religions (Tong, 2008, p. 33).

Although “most of the innovative Christian teachings and practices that have passed around the world in the last decades of the twentieth century have passed through Singapore” (DeBernardi, 2008, p. 121), it has also been argued that the “Internet and other modes of communication have made the transnational element of religion more visible and the management of religion more challenging” in Singapore (Tan, 2008, p. 61). This is not unexpected given that it is one of the world’s most “wired” nations. In 2007, 76% of all households had Internet access (up from 65% in 2003), with 77% of households using broadband connections (up from 33% in 2003) (Infocomm Development Authority of Singapore, 2009).

Given Singaporeans’ easy online access and the finding that the Internet is generally an important source of religious information, it is not surprising that Kluver *et al.* (2008, p. 435) have contended that in Singapore’s “multicultural, multireligious, ‘wired’ society . . . the use of the Internet for religious purposes has potentially important implications for interethnic and inter-religious relations, policy and education.” At the same time, “Singapore’s Christian leaders are keenly aware that they may utilize innovative practices and teachings to mobilize interest and participation” (DeBernardi, 2008, p. 121). We go on to examine how congregants’ access to technologically mediated religious knowledge vis-à-vis pastoral willingness and ability to employ such technologies affects the latter’s credibility as epistemic authoritative figures.

The Internet and threats to epistemic authority

As noted earlier, religious epistemic authority derives its legitimacy from asymmetrical communication relations that are embedded in an institutional order. The stability of authority relations depends on community trust that facilitates self-regulation through the internalization of shared norms between members and clergy. Rituals reinforce religious observances and a liturgical order as clergy lead in acts to realize divine–human communication in the public sphere. This could take the form of pulpit communication, which encourages hierarchical communicative behavior that amplifies status roles. Internet use, however, may alter churches’ resource base and potentially affect religious communication in two major ways. First, it influences traditional pedagogical norms by transforming the quality of communication. Second, it proletarianizes, deprofessionalizes, and potentially delegitimizes leadership by modifying the nature of epistemic function and thereby authority relationships.

Several pastors said that search engines and websites are increasingly important as web resources provide a relatively cheaper and faster way of conducting research and gathering sermon illustrations than referring to books. Two pastors who regularly

utilize the Internet who viewed web resources as useful for strengthening their preaching ministry said:

It [the Internet] is indeed very helpful because I think there are many fantastic sites which have references, resources and for finding out not just primarily biblical resources, data statistics.

I own an IPP software that has about 20 over books . . . If I were to buy the 20 books, it would cost me \$600, \$800. So in that sense, for me, for research, for communication, [the Internet] has [had] a positive impact. And of course it also means that my presentations can be more interesting. I could have video clips from Youtube, pictures and images I can get from Google.com . . . things like that have enhanced my ministry.

However, a few leaders noted that they were growing increasingly dependent on computer technology as their own and their congregations' expectations of the quality of their sermons, and ability to communicate via new technologies have risen. According to one pastor, he consistently works to improve his sermons to retain credibility and build "slow trust" in his longstanding relationship (Meyerson, Weick, & Kramer, 1996) with his congregation:

Because as our church has grown, the peoples' expectation has grown, my expectation of me has grown and the volume of data has grown and so in order to process the information, refine and shape it, I go through about 15–20 revisions of every sermon. That's why I have to use the computer.

Several pastors commented that oral communication over the pulpit is increasingly deemed as inadequate pedagogy among the "Youtube generation." According to two pastors, there is now "a need to be able to preach using Powerpoint" and to upload sermon notes online:

We don't have a generation that can listen for a long time, I used to listen to 45-minute sermons, but now the attention span is about 20, 25 [minutes], so we decided to put sermon notes online, and also use Powerpoint. We also do audiovisual presentations on and off in the church service because we find that it helps retention.

Because young generation fellas have short attention spans, they are the Youtube fellas so if you give them a presentation of a movie for more than 10 minutes, once you reach 15 minutes, you may as well lose your job. So it's quite challenging. Basically you can't get away with a long boring sermon nowadays.

For some, using the Internet “to inspire or boost” their sermons is perceived to increase the legitimacy of their epistemic authority and preaching by reproducing a communication framework that facilitates if not strengthen expectations of authorization. For others, the need to develop a new consciousness toward the incorporation of online materials to capture their audience’s attention is related to their laity’s rising expectations of new competences to regularly communicate religious knowledge claims. However, although digital resources may have enhanced the knowledge stock of pastors, there is a sense that control over their work has diminished resulting in proletarianization through a persistent sense of work overload. Pastors reported that e-mail communication has changed the context and content of the priestly encounter as some congregational members now perceive them to be “more accessible, not so much on a pedestal”:

In the past, to come and see the pastor, you will have to give a call, have to make an appointment. I think this [new media] has helped to bridge the gap—anyone in the congregation can now call, email. It has closed the gap between the pastor and the congregation.

Now we’re far more accessible. Because we have an email account, anyone can write to us . . . And the fact that you’re doing work faster, means that work is also increasing and things like that. Not everybody has my handphone number but everyone has my email, and when they need me they can just drop me an email.

Increased accessibility has led to a rising communicative load, leading many to feel a certain degree of a loss in control over their working pace:

It [email] does change our lifestyles a lot . . . I think that spiritual leaders nowadays tend to be stressed—the demands are much higher, much higher because in the past, as long as you can preach a good sermon on Sunday, that’s great, I’m happy throughout the whole week. But now it’s very different. People write to you, expect you to give an answer and respond to certain things.

Insofar as the Internet facilitates “timeless time” (Castells, 2000), some leaders said they fight to preserve flexibility in their schedule given the nature in which congregational members can impose multiple demands on them. Religious leaders struggle to maintain the right to initiate interaction, while having to simultaneously maintain accessibility, afforded by their staff workers and congregants’ use of wired media. Specifically, a few pastors talked about the direct effects of proletarianization as destabilizing their work (Hardey, 2001) as it is now harder for them to enforce their interests and privacy. One said, “I have changed my workstyle because I am forced to be on the computer for some time.” Another pastor said:

We're an SMS [text-messaging] society. Within 30 seconds [they] know [their] message will come through and people would expect you to reply 30 seconds later. So that is the part that you have to balance your life . . . Even if I have voicemail, I think they will hang up and send a text message. So the demand is more the sense of people expecting instant replies.

Proletarianization is often accompanied by deprofessionalization (Hardey, 2001). Epistemic religious authority is predominantly established through seminary training that serves as the basis for legitimizing authority relations. However, the relocation of religious discussions to more technologized forms creates tensions between leadership and laity. Here, most of the pastors noted that members no longer easily submit to them as experts with epistemic warrant, for example, according to one pastor:

Because there is such a wealth of information out there, I think gone are the days where, 'Because my pastors said it so, therefore it is true.' . . . I think it is more so where pastors are guides, consultants. If anything, they are coaches and it's still a biblical thing, that pastors hold spiritual authority over their flock. Though it's become less and less feasible for them to impose their authority, it still has to be exercised, but modernized or presented in a certain way.

Changes to what constitutes relevant pastoral knowledge has created a general decline in the trust of the clergy and, for some leaders, doubts about their own authority as they struggle to build competence and preserve esteem. Many said that there are pressures to reskill, "jump on the way the world communicates" or "they will be left behind." Some are now "forced to minister via instant messaging" to learn Web 2.0 communicating to connect with their members. One said:

We do have to adapt, that's the reason why we need to get on MSN, we need to get into the blogs. And for me, having a blog is also a statement that I don't want to be cut off. And I don't want to appear as one who belongs to a former generation, the old school.

As opposed to authority predicated on theological education, online resources are now accorded a higher epistemic status by some pastors who said that their ministry effectiveness depended on their mastery of web-based media, suggesting an increasing dominance of media as providers of cultural knowledge (Hjarvard, 2008). Some mentioned their "need to lurk in Internet chatrooms" to learn about youth culture, and have an "open door for counseling." The Internet has opened up networked spaces away from more circumscribed ritualistic spaces as one pastor maintains:

With young people somehow, there is a syndrome that we have noticed: when we are face to face, they don't know how to talk to you. But when they are on their

blogs, everything comes up. And so, for us, going in and reading their blogs gives us a little picture and enables us to help them . . . And sometimes you just want to go by that way of communication that opens them up and then from there build, and help them come back to a normalized human way of communication.

In a sense, online social media acquire an instrumental rationality because blogs provide pastors the details of social interaction patterns among their younger members. This, in turn, appears to enable ministers to maintain a productive authority role by expanding the scope of their expertise. In acquiring new epistemic functions, legitimacy is reconstituted such that it is not only derived from specialized knowledge, but also on the communicative character of religious authority by reconfiguring the exercise of authority in a sociocultural context. One pastor, for instance, suggests that new epistemic functions linked to new media have resulted in a change in his role “from house call to mouse call” as he strives to “be relevant to culture.”

Yet leaders must also contend with the open and rambunctious nature of information online. Several pastors expressed that their members, after encountering “heretical materials” such as alternative texts and practices online, have challenged their sermons and interpretations of theological issues. For example, one pastor said that his congregation members “no longer takes [his] answers hands down but will be curious enough to question.” Another said:

It has gone from, ‘I read somewhere’, or ‘heard from this other speaker, but it is different from what you said so what’s up with that?’ to ‘I Googled what you taught and it is different’ or ‘this other church website states in their statement of belief that infants can get dunked [baptized] but we don’t, so what’s up with that?’

One troubling aspect of this loss of informational control is when information presented online is misinterpreted and when people communicate what is considered heresy within the church. One pastor relayed the story of an incident where extremist messages were amplified online via hyperlinks to similar content and viral e-mail, instant messaging, and social networking media. Thus it is not rare for leaders’ authority to be questioned by congregants confronted with alternative sources as they evaluate, patrol, and defend the narratives and regulations of the church community. In general, pastors who are older and have less online experience tend to perceive the Internet as a threat to their autonomy and to be more critical of changes.

Although some leaders view the Internet as a threat to their epistemic authority, not all reasoned that the Web is responsible as changes in the sociodemographics and media consumption behaviors of their congregants play a part. According to one pastor:

Of course there are people in other church circles who have differing views. They find that this [use of multimedia sermons] is pandering to the lack of

discipline of the modern generation who cannot listen beyond a certain number of minutes.

In particular, pastors of smaller organizations with less administrative support and financial resources felt that they faced more severe threats to their survival and are subject to more scrutiny and comparison. This is especially in instances when members compare their pedagogy with online materials, podcasts, and vodcasts available on websites of larger and megachurches, both locally and worldwide. According to one pastor, his teachings are usually compared to pastors from bigger churches, and “he is usually aware what the critics are saying” and has to “explain” to his members that his scriptural interpretations may differ from other pastors’ sermons and resources on the Internet. Overall, pastors are faced with decreased jurisdiction over religious knowledge with the proliferation of digital resources. Although the latter may serve to augment issuance of authority, control can be delocalized resulting in a sense among several interviewees that the pastoral profession has become proletarianized and deprofessionalized.

Strategic arbitration and the (re)negotiation of epistemic authority

Although competition over legitimate epistemic authority between church leaders and alternative expertise is driven by knowledge delocalization online, such a relationship is often dialectical as pastors experience both the separateness (from their congregation) that competition brings as well as the connectedness that arises from increased networked relationships. Such relational dialectics, however, compel pastors to reconstruct the conditions of epistemic authority. Specifically, leaders reconfigure relations between the Internet and themselves by articulating practices to reclaim and relocalize authority. We observe such agency in the context of strategic arbitration in both online and offline encounters where Internet use facilitates the cocreation of information and expertise, but under conditions where laity cooperation is elicited such that it does not destabilize the church. This is achieved by retaining discretionary power among the leadership to determine informational and interpersonal outcomes.

Some religious leaders reported they consciously try to monitor, even limit, their online communication with others. One pastor said that he practices “self-censorship” online and also limits his reading time of information online. Another limits herself to the counseling issues she is directly involved in and deletes e-mail that is irrelevant or forwards it to her staff to handle. At times, discretionary acts assume a more direct spiritual bent, when pastors delay responding to their members’ queries by telling them that “they need time to pray over certain issues” to reinforce their role as religious gatekeepers. One pastor elaborated on this as follows:

I reserve the right to . . . let me think about it, pray about it first before I reply . . .
But we have different expectations; maybe it’s the maturity of the person.

Sometimes the person thinks that if you don't reply immediately you don't care, when oftentimes it's because of other responsibilities that I'm not in the office [to reply].

Selective curbing of communication has the effect of increasing interpersonal social distance with some pastors reporting that they have ceased to publish their e-mail address, or availing their cell phone numbers to congregation members. Instead, their organization provides a generic "contact me" or their assistant's e-mail address. Another senior pastor said that he would either ask his secretary to reply to e-mail or personally write very short messages:

There was a time when I resisted email. I would read the email and reply by paper, and I would ask the church secretary to reply for me. So even now, I try and cut down as much response time as possible . . . people who receive my email replies know that it is usually 'ok' or 'thanks' (laughter). And then 'thanks', I don't even spell out. I just type 'thx'. That's my reply. I try not to, I do not engage in, email dialogue.

In a sense, regulation of communication access seeks to strengthen the unequal distribution of authority between church pastors and their congregations by redrawing the boundaries for the exercise of authority. Because normative regulation reinforces the legitimacy of authority by embedding social controls and epistemic power within church culture, strategic arbitration extends to behavioral norms where leaders manage conversations of agreement and disagreement within organized practices to promote social solidarity (Heritage & Raymond, 2005). Pastors include disclaimers as a soft form of rule to depersonalize authority. This includes the establishment of new Internet civic conduct, for example, by leaders' preaching about conflict resolution to manage potentially subversive information sources that could threaten their organizations' unity. One pastor mentioned an incident where a congregational member wrote a "very emotional 40-page expose letter" about a perceived leadership conflict and forwarded it to 200 people in the church. This incident prodded her to "constantly monitor web issues" and quickly "defuse the Internet avalanche" by sending her own interpretation of controversial community events, either via a "Q & A" session or face-to-face meetings in small groups.

In addition, our interviewees also revealed the need to "maintain trust" via dialog and in person communication (Collins, 2009) in light of negative news or scandals in other churches:

Over and over again I have to get up and say, 'Look, the problems that you see in one church are not necessarily a reflection of the state of health in another congregation'. Just like one family may have issues between mum and dad, that does not mean another family . . . have the same problem.

In this way, disruption of social order demands a legitimization process that restores trust in religious order. In the interview below, legitimization is achieved through justifying the validity of authority that is embedded in scriptural authority:

So, we've actually talked a lot about conflict resolution, what does the Bible say about resolving things, what does the Bible say about gossiping and slander. The Bible says if you are going to accuse someone, you need to have 2 or 3 witnesses, a lot of these basic principles that sometimes I find relevant in the age of new media.

Strategic arbitration then allows religious leaders to realign epistemic authority with Scripture relying on the interactions between text and organizational structure to maintain trust in their authority:

What we teach everyone is very simple. According to the scriptures, we follow the leadership in church simply because they are following Christ. And how I have no authority outside the Word of God. That is something that is transparent . . . everyone goes back home, they have their Bibles, they can check it out themselves . . . If I'm out of line there, I stand corrected . . . So it's there. It can be examined.

Yet, emphasis on biblical teachings calls on special skills in systematic theology to appropriately apply core scriptures to new circumstances and reinforce traditions (Finke, 2004). Hence, strategic arbitration is deployed as a justification act to reestablish trust and to strengthen authority norms that increase the probability of its acceptance.

Other leaders refer laity to what is deemed to be credible online spiritual resources or author their own religious materials online to lessen the possibility of any appropriation of contradictory or controversial information. Because epistemic authority is in part socially determined, some pastors see the need for "branding trust" (Jones, 2007) via personal content creation to build "church brands" as a distinct and recognizable organizational voice on cyberspace in the religious marketplace of ideas (Clark, 2007). In the words of one pastor:

I think that the Internet is a very important platform for the church and there's so much nonsense out there, so much trash, and I think the way to overcome it is to give them an avenue where you can find something of substance . . . So for us as a church, this is definitely something that we value . . . If you close every other department [in the church], this [web team] is something we should not close.

It appears that legitimacy may be conserved by appealing to new, or, by expanding epistemic competencies that appear to be credible to church members. The rescaling of religious governance may have altered allegiances but church pastors appear ready

to restore trust grounded in new dialogic and interactive capabilities associated with the Web (Collins, 2009). They do so by embarking on a new “online ministry” where they deliberately engage in personal dialog, even debate with their members and seekers online. Two pastors said:

I will email them and answer, again and again or I can refer them to sites with two opposing views and let them come to their own conclusion . . . I think that is a more reasonable and fairer way to treat our members rather than trying to withdraw some knowledge from them and just give them a one-sided view.

I want to create thinking Christians, if not they will be susceptible to propaganda and all those indoctrination . . . I want them to struggle . . . I want them to go through the process. I want them to read the two views and then come up with an alternative view maybe, and if they disagree with me, you know, that’s fine.

As illustrated from our interviews, to be of epistemic value, religious authorities perceive that they must adapt to function effectively in changing mediated contexts. This is achieved in two ways. The first is through authoritativeness where compliance is elicited by establishing values that are implemented organizationally. Second, church pastors perform the role of strategic arbiters in overlapping sources of information, or in disputes among members, all of which increase the congregation’s epistemic dependence on them. Indeed church members are not always discouraged from exploring competing sources of expertise on the Internet. But leaders define the terms of deference by accruing to themselves high levels of discretion to retain or dispose of such expertise on the basis of their competence. Where clergy are cognizant of membership resistance and decline of the epistemic warrant of their professions, steps have been taken to address informational disequilibrium by practicing “consensus decision making” to cater to evolving spiritual needs (Hipps, 2005). In cases where laity contest the pastors’ judgments, deployment of epistemic superiority from Scripture is applied. In this manner, competing expertise is constructed to be an exception rather than as the norm.

Notably, in line with prior research that indicates the significance of trust to enhance organizational cooperation and virtual transactions (Hossain & Wigand, 2004), our interviewees appear to relocalize social interactions by relying on trust to achieve desirable communicative behaviors and to decrease new forms of resistance. Despite their changing roles, many pastors are pragmatic and are inclined to exploit technology to enhance their epistemic authority through Powerpoint and other media-based speech acts particularly through their sermons. They view communication technologies as a means to increase their personal charisma on the pulpit by engaging in pedagogic styles not possible before. As noted by Carey (1992), transmission communication, while useful for helping church leaders maintain some form of social control traditionally, is increasingly complemented if not subsumed by ritual communication. Here trust in the epistemic authority of church leaders is reinforced

through the social production and reproduction of religious realities for their members. The latter may be strengthened in physical sacred spaces of ceremonies (e.g., sermons, workshops, regular study group meetings) that amplify social roles and order to legitimize the epistemic status of pastors. In this way, relocalization operates through a seemingly semblance of cogovernance of information where church pastors trust their members to create channels for desired outcomes while members trust leaders to establish epistemic coherence in the context of computer-mediated communication. This helps to create a sense of progress as strategic arbitration provides the moral and cognitive influence that potentially institutionalizes meanings in ways that support authority.

Conclusion

It is oft said that the emergence of new media presents a challenge to authority held by epistemic communities whose location of epistemic power lies not only in their claim over a domain of knowledge, but it is also embedded organizationally in social relations that is traditionally structured by closed information systems and hierarchical communication. Internet adoption and access to digital media, however, is redefining religious order by facilitating the contestation of leaders' claim to expertise and religious performances, and by encouraging more networked forms of interactions.

This study identified key ways in which religious epistemic authority is expressed and negotiated via communicative practices and contributed to limited research indicating that the mediation of authority is multifaceted (Campbell, 2007; Hjarvard, 2008). This study extended findings of an earlier study conducted among religious leaders in Singapore (Kluver & Cheong, 2007) which revealed clergy's self-conscious negotiation of information technologies in alignment with their acceptance and integration of new media into extant religious practices. Our findings concur with the prior study which concluded that Christian pastors spiritually shaped the Internet into a pliant tool for evangelism but this study broadened the theoretical and empirical scope of investigation and examined how clergy communicate to relegitimize their epistemic authority and negotiate trust within new organizational practices which included access to interactive social media and Web 2.0 technologies. Here, we elaborated on the layered and dynamic relationships between authority and new media, and have provided evidences of how mediated communication works in contemporary religious organizations and its attendant changes on epistemic authority, from the rarely voiced viewpoints of religious leaders in a nonwestern context.

Our study suggests that for many pastors in Singapore, issuance of authority is not only just a matter of power but also a petering out of professional competence that undergirds communication arising from competitive online sources. Moreover, as church members largely prioritize authority in terms of judgments and reasoning that are expressed by leaders, the conveyance of authority may be potentially

diminished by demands of more timeless, flatter forms of mediated communication. Among youth members, for example, pastors are confronted with the dilemma of relinquishing power in the public sphere to blogs and social media to engage in sustained communication. Clergy working within wired contexts are compelled to be part of social online networks by “lurking” in forums to connect with their community. This dependency or “media logic” (Hjarvard, 2008), however, divests them of organizational control that subsequently forces them to erect informational barriers through disclaimers, or avoiding direct contact. This, in turn, results in the loss of ability to dictate to members what behaviors are normative. Together, they suggest processes of proletarianization and deprofessionalization at work.

Despite their changing roles, many pastors are pragmatic and view communication technologies as a means to relegitimize authority. By acting as strategic arbiters of fragmented expertise, the epistemic authority of leaders is reinforced through the social production and reproduction of religious realities for their members. Moreover, while access to media resources may contract leaders’ capacity to speak, they also valorize the character of authority as leaders secure their autonomy by revising their social identity to reflect more inclusive forms of authority relationships. This does not imply epistemic dilution but rather the reassertion of trust among members, and thereby epistemic standards through arbitration. Furthermore, to counter deprofessionalism, some leaders have been able to grow their media representation and influence through practices online (e.g., sermon publication and webcast productions) that function as authority markers. In addition, because effective exercise of authority depends on clergy’s management of a social division of communication relations, acquisition of new epistemic functions through strategic arbitration in social media strengthens normative regulation of power by aligning epistemic knowledge to members’ understanding of religious norms.

In summary, the immunity from accountability that clergy once enjoyed may have weakened in light of a more technologically networked congregation. Considerable resolve, however, may be found among the leaders examined here to reclaim their authority by expanding their roles to include that of strategic arbiters of offline and online religious knowledge, as well as interpersonal conflicts that arise from delocalized authority. Hence, while pluralistic knowledge may reduce autonomy, it also opens up a new space for knowledge interpretation and synthesis. Under such circumstances, authority acquires a new modality of relegitimization.

Finally, some caveats are noted. This article has relied on self-reports because in-depth interviews provide the advantages of thick descriptions of cultural change and valued detail for organizational communication analysis. Consequently, generalization is not sought with this sample. On-going data collection with Buddhist priests should result in comparative religious studies in the future. This will enable greater generalizability if Internet use is helpful or hurtful to religious epistemic authority, and refine the implications of specific types of web-based media for changing religious authority structures. It is recommended that future studies widen empirical research in different cultural and geographic contexts with institutional differences in

religious traditions, such as the importance of legal interpretations for diasporic and Southeast Asian Islam (Turner, 2007) to examine diverse expressions of epistemic authority. Future research could also investigate perceptions toward authority from the standpoints of congregational members, particularly youths who might have a lower threshold of trust toward religious epistemic authority. In an extended time frame, future studies could embark on a longitudinal analysis as to how clergy value and control tensions experienced by Internet accessibility overtime and how clergy communicate to achieve a balance between pastoral autonomy and ministry demands, between church branding and the maintenance of religious community.

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Notes

- 1 Although we consciously endeavored to include Catholics, we have only been able to interview two priests because, at the point of our study, many of the Catholic churches either had rudimentary or no websites (although a recent report [*The Straits Times*, 28 January 2010] suggests that some now have Facebook pages); those that did have more sophisticated websites, declined to be interviewed. The interviews with the Buddhist organizations are still ongoing.
- 2 Because of space constraints, the data and information presented in subsequent sections reflect “representative” responses from clergy that attempted to minimize over and underreporting.
- 3 This is the most recent data available on religious affiliation in Singapore. Percentages are probably underestimated as census information is gathered from heads of households. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some non-Christian parents do oppose their children’s conversion; as such, parents may not report their children’s religion accurately.

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网络信仰组织宗教传播和领袖的认识论权威

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【摘要：】

传播的调解作用引发了重要的社会机构中的权力转移问题。本文通过与新加坡新教牧师的深度访谈,研究互联网在宗教权威中支配社会关系的认识论权威的传统来源是如何被放大或去合法化的。竞争上网在一定程度上将认知权威去区域化;然而,它也让牧师这一作为拥有专业 and 知识的宗教战略仲裁者获得新的能力而使权威重新回来。研究表明,宗教领袖们面临着无产阶级化、非专业化以及潜在的非合法化这些认识论上的威胁,但他们同时也通过采取媒体调节的做法,包括网络圣会来确保其认识论权威。

La communication religieuse et l'autorité épistémique des leaders d'organisations religieuses branchées

La médiation de la communication a soulevé des enjeux de glissements de l'autorité dans certaines institutions sociales clés. À partir d'entretiens en profondeur avec des pasteurs protestants à Singapour, cet article examine comment les sources traditionnelles de pouvoir épistémique qui gouvernent les relations sociales à l'autorité religieuse sont amplifiées ou délégitimées par l'usage d'Internet. La compétition qu'offre l'accès à Internet délocalise l'autorité épistémique dans une certaine mesure. Cependant, elle réinstaure aussi l'autorité en permettant aux pasteurs d'acquérir de nouvelles compétences en tant qu'arbitres stratégiques de l'expertise et de la connaissance religieuses. Notre étude indique que si les leaders religieux sont confrontés aux menaces épistémiques de la prolétarianisation, de la déprofessionnalisation et d'une potentielle délégitimisation, il se produit aussi une amélioration de leur mandat épistémique lorsqu'ils adoptent des pratiques de communication médiatisée qui incluent les réseaux sociaux de leur congrégation.

Mots clés : autorité religieuse, Internet, communication médiée par ordinateur, arbitres stratégiques, organisations fondées sur la foi

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Religiöse Kommunikation und epistemische Autorität von Führungspersonlichkeiten in vernetzten Glaubensorganisationen

Die Mediation von Kommunikation hat Fragen hinsichtlich der Veränderung von Autoritäten in zentralen sozialen Institutionen aufgeworfen. In diesem Artikel untersuchen wir, wie traditionelle Quellen epistemischer Macht, welche soziale Beziehungen in religiösen Ämtern regulieren, durch Internetnutzung verstärkt oder entlegitimiert werden. Die Befunde basieren auf Tiefeninterviews mit protestantischen Pfarrern in Singapur. Wie sich gezeigt hat, entgrenzt ein konkurrierender Internetzugang epistemische Autorität in gewissem Maße, bettet diese aber gleichzeitig auch wieder ein, indem die Pfarrer befähigt werden, sich neue Kompetenzen als strategische Schlichter mit religiöser Expertise und Wissen anzueignen. Unsere Studie lässt darauf schließen, dass sich religiöse Führer zwar einerseits mit Proletarisierung, Entprofessionalisierung und potentieller Entlegitimierung als epistemische Bedrohungen konfrontiert sehen, andererseits aber auch eine Erweiterung der epistemischen Befugnis erfahren, indem sie sich mediatisierte Kommunikationspraktiken, die die sozialen Netzwerke ihrer Gemeinde einschließen, aneignen.

Schlüsselbegriffe: religiöse Autoritäten, Internet, computervermittelte Kommunikation, strategische Schlichter, Glaubensorganisationen

네트워크화된 종교기관들에서의 종교커뮤니케이션과 리더들의 인식론적 권위에 관한

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요약

커뮤니케이션 매개는 주요 사회적 기관들에서의 권위 이전의 문제들을 제기하였다. 본 연구는 종교적인 권위내에서의 사회적 관계들을 지배하는 인식론적 파워의 전통적 자원들이 어떻게 인터넷사용에 의해 확대되거나 비권위화되는지에 대해 연구한 것이다. 연구는 싱가포르내의 신교도 목사들을 대상으로 한 인터뷰를 통해 단행되었다. 인터넷 접근으로부터의 경쟁들은 인식론적 권위를 어느정도 감소시키는 것으로 나타났다. 그러나, 이는 또 목사들이 종교적 전문성과 지식의 전략적인 중재자로서 새로운 능력을

확보하게 함으로써 새로운 권위를 부여한 측면도 있다. 우리는 연구는 종교적인 지도자들은 인식론적 위협으로서 무산계급화, 탈전문화, 그리고 잠재적인 탈합법화에 직면하고 있는 반면, 그들의 집회의 사회적 네트워크를 포함하는 중개된 커뮤니케이션 실행을 채택하는 것에 의한 인식론적 보장을 확대하는 측면도 있다는 것을 보여주고 있다.