

METHODS AND THEORY FOR STUDYING RELIGION ON THE INTERNET

INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE ON THEORY AND METHODOLOGY¹

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When the topic of religion on the Internet was highlighted in the late 1990s, Lorne Dawson raised some basic questions for future research:

First, we need to know what is on the Internet, who has put it there, and for what purpose. Second, we need to know how many people are using these resources. How often are they using them? In what ways are they using them? We need to develop a social profile of those who use the Internet for religious purposes ... Third, we need to know what influence these activities are having on religions and practices of users.²

Religious Internet research is just beginning and some of these questions have provoked initial answers – but most of the questions have stimulated even more issues with regard to substantial and methodological demands. The social aspects and consequences of religious Internet use, particularly, still have to be considered in further research. Immanent Internet research offers many new perspectives for religious studies. While traditional media like books, magazines, and television enable us to see only the supplier and the supplies on the *religious market*, the Internet – as an *interactive* medium – now makes it possible to be aware of the consumer's perspective as well. By observing Internet chat rooms, guest books, frequently asked questions (FAQs), and discussion forums and discussion lists (which are normally archived) on religion-related Web sites in particular, we can observe the way religious knowledge is spread in an online community in detail. We can recognize that these new processes of communication create new hierarchies among users in discussion forums. This new diffusion of ritual knowledge, which is nowadays accessible to every Internet user, also signifies changes in the traditional structure of religious communities. However, we still know very little about what people are actually doing with the ritual and religious knowledge that they gain from Internet use.

¹ I would like to thank N. Miczek, C. Grugeon and A. Pesch for their tremendous support editing this volume.

² Dawson 2000, 28.

Thus, on the one hand we need to discuss new methodological and theoretical approaches in Internet research but we also have to consider the shortcoming of past approaches. Some Internet researchers, for example Clair Hewson et al., do not recognize any methodological problems in pure online research and have an euphoric view of Internet users as "the most diverse and easily accessible group available to researchers in the behavioral and social sciences."³ However, although religious communication on the Internet enables us to trace many instances of "invisible religion,"⁴ the "disembedment" of our empirical field of research causes some new methodological challenges that must not be ignored. Dealing with these empirical and theoretical aspects of computer-mediated communication (CMC) might help us to evaluate the results of online research and develop reliable research strategies for further projects in the field of religion on the Internet.

This first volume of *Online. Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* contains six articles dedicated to theoretical and methodological questions concerning the topic of religion on the Internet. Other than Mia Lövheim's contribution, all articles are derived from papers presented at the International Research Meeting *Online-Religions and Rituals-Online*, held in October 2004 at the University of Heidelberg, Germany. The conference was organized by members of the research project *Between Online-Religion and Religion Online: Forms of Ritual Transfer on the Internet*, which has been part of the *Dynamics of Rituals* collaborative research center at Heidelberg University since 2002.

In his article *Online Religion as Lived Religion: Methodological Issues in the Study of Religious Participation on the Internet* Christopher Helland proposes a more comprehensive framework for his theoretical distinction for online religion and religion online. When he developed this typology in 1999, Helland recognized a clear distinction between religious Web sites where people could act with unrestricted freedom and a high level of interactivity (online religion) versus the majority of religious Web sites, which seemed to provide only religious information and no interaction (religion online).⁵ He now advances the religion online / online religion framework by drawing from the ongoing critique of his earlier work. He concludes that many religious Web sites today provide both information and an area where this information can be lived and communicated. This occurs on the Internet where Web sites try to incorporate both an information zone and interaction zone in a single site or, more commonly, where popular unofficial Web sites provide the area for online religion, while the official religious Web site supplies religion online. In cases where institutional

³ Hewson et al. 2003, 31.

⁴ Luckmann 1967.

religious organizations do not support online religion he assumes that it may be due to their perception of the Internet as a tool for communicating rather than an extension of our social world.

Heidi Campbell deals with another important aspect of "lived religion" and the Internet. In her contribution *Spiritualising the Internet: Uncovering Discourses and Narratives of Religious Internet Usage*, she focuses on how spiritual or religious worldviews shape the use and study of the Internet. Individuals and groups typically employ one of a range of conceptual models (such as the Internet as an information tool, identity workshop, common mental geography, social network or spiritual space) to frame their understanding of Internet technology and how it should be used. Narratives about the nature of this technology are often embedded within these discourses. Of particular interest to Campbell is the identification of narratives used to shape religious or spiritual Internet usage. Some of these can be described as offering a religious identity, support network, spiritual network or worship space. According to Campbell, religious narratives describe the religious group's motivations and beliefs about acceptable use of technology in spiritual pursuits. They also highlight a process of negotiation and framing that is often undertaken in order to justify religious Internet usage. Campbell introduces Katz and Aakhus's *Apparageist* theory of the social use of mobile technology, which provides one way to discuss this religious apologetic process related to the Internet.⁶ She is convinced that it also helps to uncover how technological selection can be linked to the spiritual worldviews to which individuals and/or groups ascribe.

In his article *The Death of a Virtual Muslim Discussion Group: Issues and Methods in Analysing Religion on the Internet*, Göran Larsson discusses and tests the way an Islamic online discussion group could be analyzed. The contribution deals both with theoretical and methodological questions. All the suggested approaches are tested against data taken from the Swedish Muslim discussion group, *Sveriges Förenade CyberMuslimer* (SFCM), which was the largest Muslim discussion group in Swedish at the time of writing. Larsson argues that it is necessary to develop fresh approaches and combine online research with traditional fieldwork (in particular interviews) in order to be able to use data taken from the Internet. Larsson also demonstrates that analyzing a Swedish Muslim discussion group requires recognition of the significant exchange with the global Muslim community in different languages and on many "global" topics.

⁵ See Helland 2000, 205-224.

⁶ See Katz & Aakhus 2002, 305.

In 1995, Sherry Turkle argued that "virtual experiences" – that is experiences of interaction and the construction of meaning and identity online – could be "the raft, the ladder, the transitional space, the moratorium, that is discarded after reaching greater freedom." In short, "life on the screen" was considered as a "space for growth."⁷ As in many contemporary studies, Turkle's conclusions were heavily influenced by the utopian or dystopian ideas of the public and academic discourse of the Internet during the mid 1990s. A decade later, Mia Lövheim now asks what we have learnt about the possibility of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) providing this space? When, where, how, and for whom can this become a reality? Her article *Young People and the Use of the Internet as Transitional Space* discusses this issue, starting from an area of central importance to these issues: religion and young people in the process of constructing self-identity in the transition from childhood to adulthood. Studies of religion in post-modern society have shown that the function of religious beliefs, practices, and institutions in providing a transitional space for such processes is changing. Lövheim presents her recent study of young men and women using a Swedish Web community for discussing both established and alternative religious discourses, and for forging what Nancy Ammerman terms "religious autobiographies".⁸

Gernot Meier deals with some methodological problems in his article *Researching Individual Religiosity in the Context of the Internet*. Focusing on the FIGU Community and the Ashtar Command Movement on the Internet, Meier illustrates our theoretical and empirical difficulties in defining a religious community on the Internet. In the end, he provides a perspective on new research systems for Internet researchers.

Finally, Oliver Krüger discusses some empirical problems of Internet research in his contribution *Discovering the Invisible Internet. Methodological Aspects of Searching Religion on the Internet*. Analysis of online discussion groups within the Wiccan and neopagan movement that refer to rituals indicates that new social and hierarchical structures also emerge within the "online community". Nonetheless, only subsequent interviews with users of those discussion forums could reveal some basic aspects of online communication and its social dimension. This gives rise to some further questions. How much can we tell about communication on religious Web sites? What are the limits of an immanent analysis of Web sites? What can we tell about social structures within online communities and about individual user preferences in a ritual discourse? How can we deal with the problem of identity of Internet users? What is empirically invisible for us? Acknowledging the limits of

⁷ See Turkle 1995, 262.

⁸ See Ammerman 2003.

our conclusions on postmodern religion and religious people derived purely from online research, Krüger advocates combining online research with classical empirical fieldwork, such as quantitative surveys or qualitative interviews with users and Webmasters.

We hope that these articles dealing with theoretical and methodological aspects of Internet research in the field of religion will initiate a fruitful debate and further reflection on different approaches and research methods.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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ONLINE RELIGION AS LIVED RELIGION
METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES IN THE STUDY OF RELIGIOUS
PARTICIPATION ON THE INTERNET

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One of the greatest difficulties in studying religion on the Internet is keeping pace with its rapid developments and changes. This has been a significant issue when developing theoretical frameworks for examining religious participation on the World Wide Web. Religion has always had a significant online presence, but it is a shifting environment with the number of sites increasing rapidly,¹ and the types of sites created changing significantly with the advancements of new technologies. When I first proposed my theoretical distinction for online religion and religion online I did so based upon an examination of the religious based websites available to me at the end of 1999.² At that time there was a clear distinction between religious websites where people could act with unrestricted freedom and a high level of interactivity (online religion) verses the majority of religious websites, which seemed to provide only religious information and not interaction (religion online).

Examining the websites at that time, there was also a correlation between official religious groups and religion online and non-official religious websites and online religion. Although it was not absolute, in that many 'home made' religious web pages offered only information, it appeared that religious institutions were reluctant to develop open and interactive areas on the WWW. Areas where people could interact, share or argue about their religious beliefs, or even participate in online ceremonies appeared to be provided by non-official and popular religious groups or by commercial ventures such as Usenet. However, over the last five years official religious organizations have adapted to the online environment and have changed the manner in which they allow for online interaction. Despite these changes, the heuristic framework of online

¹ For example, in the Yahoo directory for Religion and Spiritual Beliefs, the category containing Christian websites increased by 234 sites over a 24 hour period in August of 2002. Over that same period of time there were 54 new Jewish sites, 38 new sites on Islam, 32 new sites on Buddhism, and 10 new sites on Divination.

² See Helland 2000, 205-224.

religion and religion online is still applicable, but it too needs to develop to keep pace with the alterations that have occurred on the Internet medium.

To advance the religion online / online religion framework, I will draw from the most detailed critique and examination of this earlier work, which was presented by Glenn Young. In Young's critique he specifically addresses the issue of interactivity and religious participation at official and non-official websites by recognizing two distinctions within the online religion / religion online framework. "These are: (1) the provision of information about religion versus the opportunity for participation in religious activity, and (2) primary reference to offline, pre-existing religious traditions versus primary reference to religious activities taking place online."³

Examining these issues, Young recognizes that an absolute distinction between online religion (where people are allowed the opportunity to participate in religious activity), and religion online (where people are given information about religion) may not be the best interpretation of religious interaction at websites. Instead, Young argues:

If religion online and online religion are treated as two theoretical endpoints, then the issues of information provision versus religious participation, and primary reference to online versus offline activity, can be understood as two axes which extend between them.⁴

This view is also shared by Douglas Cowan,⁵ who recognizes that within the online neo-pagan tradition, vast majorities of the websites fall in between these two areas. Cowan argues that although there are sites that provide either religion online or online religion, a significant number of neo-pagan and Wicca sites are trying to bridge the gap between the two and offer both.

By examining representations of the Christian belief system on the Internet, Young tries to draw this same conclusion. He interprets these levels of online religious participation as axis points within a range, not as two separate spheres. Within the case studies presented by Young, he argues that "even at the relatively simple level of congregational Christian Web sites which deal with an individual church community, there are examples where information and participation conjoin".⁶ To support his argument, Young demonstrates that some official church sites, such as www.standrewkc.org, may have features such as an "Online Prayer Request Form". In this case, individuals can send their prayer request to the church, giving them some level of opportunity to interact with the website. Another official church site (www.aic.org) has a "Prayer

³ Young 2004, 93.

⁴ Young 2004, 94.

⁵ See Cowan 2005.

⁶ Young 2004, 94.

Request Page”, where people’s prayer requests are placed online for others to view. In both cases, it demonstrates that, “a Web site largely concerned with a one-way flow of information from the church as representative of the Christian faith to the Web site visitor now invites a reciprocal flow of information, and perhaps activity ... ”⁷

Although it is important to recognize that there is a spectrum, or axis, when it comes to assessing online religious participation at the websites, you cannot discount issues of control related to interaction levels. Using Young’s examples, at Alive in Christ,⁸ people are allowed to post prayer requests, however, the site may be censoring the prayers that are allowed to be posted, and in the section on “current prayer concerns” there is only one prayer posted from 2002 and three prayers from 2004. In the case of Saint Andrews,⁹ where people are allowed to click on the icon for an “Online Prayer Request”, it is important to recognize that this is a very minimal form of online-religious interaction, since clicking on the icon originally created a pop-up window that allowed the individual to send the church an email. Recently this was changed to allow for an online prayer request form similar to the AIC website but this is still representative of one-to-many communication rather than any form of many-to-many communication or interaction.

To strengthen the argument, Young presents examples that demonstrate some level of interaction can occur even at an official denominational website. His primary case supporting this comes from the United Methodist Church¹⁰ where Young finds that the site includes only information. However, there is a link page available that directs people to areas where such things as prayer instruction, devotional information, and “suggestions for a thought and prayer focus for the day” are available. People can also sign up to receive a daily email where a devotional prayer will be sent to them. For Young, “the Daily Devotional page represents a shift away from the simple reception of information to a more complex participation in the activity of prayer”.¹¹

Despite this example demonstrating that an organization structured primarily for religion online, such as the United Methodist Church, does allow for activity, it must be recognized that people are still receiving information rather than contributing to any form of online interaction.

⁷ Young 2004, 95.

⁸ Website of Alive in Christ.org, from: <http://www.aic.org>.

⁹ Website of Saint Andrew’s Episcopal Church.org, from: <http://www.standrewkc.org>.

¹⁰ Website of United Methodist Church.org, from: <http://www.umc.org>.

¹¹ Young 2004, 96.

Although they can point and click their mouse, that action can only be used to receive information. It still represents the use of the medium by the organization in a form of one-to-many communication.

It is clear that there are a variety of religious websites available and that there are also a variety of forms of religious participation available to those who go online. As technology has developed, it is easier for a website designer to create an area, such as a chat room or BBS, where interactions can take place. However, technological limitations have never been an issue for the larger institutionalized religious organizations. What this tells us is that despite the technology being readily available for religious based websites to provide both religion online and online religion, not all of them do. This is important because the type of communication and interaction occurring effects the online religious environment.

Religious organizations and institutions are very conscious of the way their websites function. Nothing appears on the Internet out of chance or by accident, in fact a significant amount of time, money, and thought are required to develop an institutional religious website.¹² The manner in which religious groups structure their websites directly influences the type of communication and interaction that can occur. As Manuel Castell argues, the Internet is ideally designed for many-to-many communication, which represents a form of networked interaction that is significantly different from the form of one-to-many communication used by centralized hierarchies.¹³ The groups that are allowing for online religion are in many ways representative of a networked form of religious interaction and participation, which is significantly different from groups that are using the medium to support their hierarchical ‘top down’ religious worldview. Online religion is in some ways reminiscent of the Protestant Reformation, in that the Church and the priesthood are no longer considered an important intermediary between the people and their religious practice. Many-to-many communication does not need a hierarchy to function, but rather relies upon an open and equal level of participation by all members. This has significant implications concerning how religion functions as a cultural system, since there is considerably more to religion than just information. Clifford Geertz argues that religion provides a “model of” understanding our place within the cosmos and a “model for” guiding and directing our human activity. However, in order for people to really accept and embrace a particular religious

¹² See Helland 2000.

¹³ See Castells 2001, 2.

worldview, they have to “do” the religion — this occurs through the way they live, the way they interact, and the rituals they participate in.¹⁴

However, this raises the significant theoretical problem of determining what constitutes “doing” religion on the Internet. More specifically, what constitutes online religion? Using the earlier examples presented by Young in his critique of the online religion framework, to establish that sending an email requesting a prayer to a church organization is a form of online religion requires an interpretation of the activity as both being “religious” and also interactive. Young recognizes that this is a problem and states that, “One could of course question whether making a prayer request is itself prayer, but this would be difficult to answer without knowing the minds of those who use the prayer request form”.¹⁵

Due to the subjective nature of religious experience, it is hard to determine if certain cases of online activity are or are not religious. This also raises the question concerning the methods employed to establish this assessment, since traditional frameworks are based upon the offline religious world. A primary example can be seen in the act of reading religious scriptures. On many official websites sacred scriptures are available to be read online.¹⁶ In fact, scriptural content is quite common at both official and non-official sites; this includes the Koran, Hebrew Scriptures, New Testament, the Book of Mormon, Gnostic texts, and an amazing assortment of other works. Yet is reading scripture a religious act? Further more, is reading scripture from a website an enactment of an online religious practice? In many ways, the only possible way to answer these questions is by focusing upon the participant’s perception and their subjective interpretation of that event.

To address this issue, Young modifies the work of John Austin (1970), developing his conception of “performative utterances”. Young modifies the concept to argue that online religious practice is a type of speech act, where the participant is saying something that is actually doing something, and doing something while they are saying something. In this way, websites that contain information, which the person reads out loud, and also a participatory quality can allow for some form of online religion.

The example used by Young is the *Church For All Website*,¹⁷ where after accepting a statement of faith, an individual has the ability to click an icon to join the organization. Young

¹⁴ See Geertz 1966, 1-46.

¹⁵ Young 2004, 95.

¹⁶ For example see the website of the *Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* at <http://www.lds.org>.

¹⁷ Website of Church of All.org, from: <http://www.churchofall.org>.

argues that the combined act of reading, or saying, the statement, along with clicking the mouse on an icon is equivalent to a performative utterance, and therefore an act of online religion.

Although this framework is helpful, it is limited in its application. First and foremost, how many people actually read the text of a licensing agreement before they click the “OK” button to install software. How is it possible to determine if the person clicking their mouse on the icon to join the church has read the information and is acting with that intent in mind? Although Young argues “it would, we can assume, be pointless to make such a declaration if one did not also hold the substance of that declaration to be true ...”¹⁸ I disagree, since I clicked on the link just to see what would happen and I’m sure others have done the same.

This raises a key issue and concern when studying religion on the Internet: What action or online activity can be considered a genuine religious action? How is it possible to determine if the people practicing forms of online religion are in fact conducting actual religious activities and having genuine religious experiences? As ritual studies recognize, it is not merely the action that makes an activity religious, rather it is the intent behind the action that gives it its religious significance. For example, lighting a candle may or may not be considered a religious event; it is dependant upon the situation and also the interpretation of the participants. The same holds true for clicking hyperlinks on websites. People may or may not be undertaking the activity to obtain a true religious experience. In many ways, evaluating the activity focuses upon the authenticity of the event and this is something that is extremely problematic to determine.

To overcome this difficulty, it requires that the researcher make some form of assessment based upon what can be observed. Much like viewing a ritual in the off-line environment, a participant observer can gage (to one degree or another) the authenticity of the experience for the practitioners. Although this is not absolute, within the field of religious research it is not an uncommon methodological approach. Applied to the online environment,

... the apparent authenticity of a religious activity or experience will play a determinate role ... in whether the Internet will become a forum for core religious activities and serious religious engagement. Consequently, those wishing to study this possibility must come to grips with the ‘authenticity’ of religious experiences as a key descriptive category, explicitly or implicitly invoked by the people they are studying.¹⁹

¹⁸ Young 2004, 99.

¹⁹ Dawson forthc. 2005.

To demonstrate the varying levels of religious authenticity on the Internet, and how they can be approached for evaluation, I will use two case studies of online religious activity. The first concerns posting prayers and prayer requests, the second relates to performing online rituals.

Posting prayers and requesting prayers is perhaps the most frequent form of online religion occurring. Although this may not be as common in all religious traditions using the Internet, within the Christian environment this activity appears regularly.²⁰ Despite being a frequent occurrence, the methods used to post prayers varies from site to site and highlights the varying levels of religious activity occurring online. This activity can involve sending an email to a church, filling out an online prayer form, posting a prayer or prayer request on a website for people to view, placing a prayer or prayer request in a BBS environment where others can respond, or using synchronous chat to pray or ask for a prayer in ‘real time’. Although each of these activities is a form of prayer or prayer request, they are decidedly different online occurrences.

For example, on the website www.catholic.org people have the ability to send a prayer request to the organization. However, this is a much more involved process than simply sending an email: the person must fill out a prayer request form. The form contains several required fields, meaning that certain questions must be answered before the form can be submitted. The questions include: first and last name, mailing address, phone number, gender, date of birth, the name of the Catholic school you may have attended, name of parish, name of diocese. Then there are four scroll-down selections that must be completed. The first requires your political party affiliation; answers include Republican, Democrat, Libertarian, Independent American and Green Party. The next three sections are called “Issues and Concerns”, and each section has the same 10 selections available. These are: Pro Life, Stem Cell, Homeland Security, Privacy Issues, Death Penalty, Separation of Church and State, Confessional Privacy, Protect our Children, Euthanasia, and Immigration. After this section of the questionnaire is completed, the person can type in a prayer request. However, before submitting the prayer they must also answer if they are willing to make a donation to the organization and if they would like to be placed upon an email mailing list.

The procedure at www.catholic.org is fairly complicated and in many ways may remove a sense of spontaneity from the act of praying. When examining this particular case of online

²⁰ As of 2003, Christianity represents more than 72% of all religious based websites, so this form of online religious activity is by far the most common.

activity, there is no way to evaluate the types of prayers being submitted or determine if they are genuine, since they are not made public. Although the people may be sharing their prayers with the religious organization, it represents a form of one-to-one communication and is a private matter between the church and the individual, much like a confession. Unfortunately, because it cannot be observed, this type of activity cannot be evaluated or studied by participant observation or an ethnographic examination of the Internet environment. To assess this form of private communication, either the church would have to divulge the prayers they are receiving or people sending prayers to www.catholic.org would have to be surveyed. In many ways this is the same problem researchers would face if they went into a real church setting. They can observe the rituals, the interactions among the participants, and a number of other activities, but they cannot go and sit in the confessional and listen to a private conversation. This type of activity represents the gray area of classification between online religion and religion online. There is no way to evaluate the activity taking place in the private space of a cyber-confessional. Although they are using the Internet to have some sort of interaction with a religious professional, for all we know, they could be talking about the weather.

An example of a more public prayer request can be seen in a case study from the [Soc.religion.christian](http://soc.religion.christian) BBS network that occurred during the period of May 20th to June 4th, 2001. On May 20th, user “Olayinka Olaleye” began a discussion with the subject heading: “Pray for me”. In the short posting “Olayinka” asked for people to pray for her good marital relations, that she would do well in school and “Pray that my job will be waiting for me after graduation”. The initial response to the discussion thread came from user “Hiscoming” and was a genuine prayer:

Heavenly Father I pray for your child that You will have mercy and fulfill her heart desire. Have your way and your say regarding her marital life, academics and career. Lord, I pray that Your perfect will be fulfilled in her life in Jesus' name amen.
(soc.religion.christian 21-05-2001)

However, the next posting by “Thomas” (perhaps doubting Thomas) challenged Olayinka’s prayer request for being too materialistic. “Thomas” argued, “I would not feel comfortable praying for your financial success”. This began a serious discussion concerning what constitutes an appropriate prayer. “Thomas” was challenged over the next 7 posts with individuals quoting scriptures and questioning his position. For the most part, the arguments were well developed and supported with scriptural references. “Dave Mullenix” asked “Thomas”, “How do you feel about ‘Give us this day our daily bread’?” “Frank Roy” concluded the discussion by quoting 5 scriptural sources that defended the use of prayer to ask for material support.

This example of prayer request and prayer posting highlights the issue of online-religious interactivity and also authenticity. It appears that the user “Olayinka Olaleye” had the genuine intent of asking for online prayer support and the prayer response from “Hiscoming” also appears genuine. In this case, both people were practicing a form of online religious participation. Placing a prayer on a BBS is a public expression of religious faith that can be evaluated to determine if it is an authentic religious activity, and in this case it was. Although the other eight postings in the discussion thread were not prayers, they can also be considered manifestations of online religion because they were genuine expressions of religious beliefs and practices, placed within an interactive environment. Although they were not personally engaging in a form of prayer, they were engaging in a religious dialogue focused upon genuine faith-based concerns.

This case study also shows that not all the participants in the same online environment are having the same types of religious experiences or interactions. The Soc.religion.christian BBS has hundreds of regular participants, yet only a handful chose to post in response to Olayinka’s prayer request. This highlights an important issue. Just because people are in the environment, or clicking links, does not mean that they are doing online religion. Again, this demonstrates that there is more to evaluate online religion than just an examination of the setting or the links. The participants must be observable.

Another situation on the WWW where high levels of online religion appear to be occurring is during actual online religious rituals. Although one might think that all online ceremonies represent the same high level of activity, this is not the case. To demonstrate these differences I will examine two very different forms of online religious participation.

The first case study comes from the soc.religion.shamanism Usenet discussion group. On May 9, 1997, Usenet user “Father John Missing” began a discussion posting called “Invitation to online ritual”. From the posting, it appeared there was a regular group meeting for online ritual activities and that Father Missing was reminding people of the upcoming ritual on Tuesday night at 10 pm and encouraging others to participate. The group was called the “Creation Spirituality Celebration Circle” and appeared to be well organized and structured. Father Missing described the group as “a community scattered across the Earth who meet weekly for ritual and discussion” (soc.religion.shamanism 05/09/1997).

By researching the postings on the Usenet network and the Internet I was able to determine that Father John Missing was ordained to the priesthood of the American Catholic Church, Diocese of Central Florida. He structured the format for his online activity based upon another

online ritual group led by Father John Mabry on the AOL network. He began the weekly ritual meetings on March 25, 1997 and they continued for an indeterminable period of time. Unfortunately, I have not been able to contact Father Missing. Although he did begin the construction of a website called “Holy Resurrection Abbey: A Virtual Monastic Community”,²¹ it no longer appears active and his email address does not work.

Although the invitation for people to attend the online ritual has been preserved in the soc.religion.shamanism archive, no records were kept concerning the actual ritual events. They occurred as IRC chat and were not recorded. This is a serious issue in regards to online ceremonies. Although some groups post their ritual activity on their websites after they have been completed,²² many use chat rooms, telnet areas such as Cyber Coven Talker, or IRC, where the text messaging used to undertake the activity is not saved. However, the Creation Spirituality Celebration Circle did provide a format to structure their events, which was preserved. Their activity included participating in prayers, blessings and visualizations, and conducting a short ceremony.

Concerning the issue of authenticity, I have no doubt that Father Missing was an actual religious specialist conducting genuine online religious ritual services. Those that participated would most likely be genuine in their interests, since logging on to the IRC network at that time required some effort and technical know how. It was not as easy then as it is now to enter into synchronous real time chat. People who wanted to participate would need to make an effort to attend and also be required to meet at a certain time, which depending upon their time zone, could be quite inconvenient. These factors demonstrate a level of commitment that most likely represents genuine interest and authenticity. The online rituals were also very public events. Anyone who logged on to the IRC network and typed the command “/join #creationcelebrcircle blessing” Tuesday night at 10 pm EDT would be able to participate or watch the interaction.

Due to these factors, it is clear that there was a high level of religious activity occurring in this setting. People joined the Creation Spirituality Celebration Circle in order to bring their religious beliefs and practices to life. They shared information, prayed together, participated in group ceremonies and created an environment where religiosity could be expressed. This was an ideal example of online religion.

²¹ This website has been available on <http://www.angelfire.com/fl/FellowshipOfMercy/>.

²² See e.g. *The Dance* website at <http://www.thedance.com/rituals/>.

The second case study reveals that certain online ritual activities can in fact have low levels of online religious participation. This low level of activity can be seen by examining the e-communion ritual available at the Church of the Simple Faith.²³ The website belongs to a virtual church organization that practices a form of evangelical Christianity. On the website, there are clear directions provided for undertaking the “e-Communion” ceremony.

Before beginning the e-communion, the participants are told they will need to prepare by collecting a cup of juice (alcoholic beverages are not recommended) and a loaf of bread. They are also encouraged to follow two rules before beginning. First, they are to click a hyperlink leading to the biblical communion message. Reading this message is to establish that the online ceremony is “a serious service and is being done in remembrance of the sacrifice our Lord has made”. Those wishing to participate are also told that they should not rush the ceremony but rather plan to set aside 15 to 20 minutes. After the preparations are completed, the ceremony can begin when the participant clicks on the hyperlink for the “Communion Service Program”. The program consists of a page of text messages that the individual is to read and several instructions concerning the actions he or she should take. There are also two hyperlinks that are to be clicked, which provide the words for songs that are to be sung during the service.

Assessing the online religious participation occurring during this ceremony is difficult. First, it is impossible to gauge the intent of those using the website; there is no way to tell if they are practicing an authentic form of online ritual because they cannot be observed or evaluated. It is clear that the people who designed the website and ritual page did so to allow for a genuine form of religious experience, but there is no way to tell how, or even if, this ritual is being undertaken authentically. This is also a private event; you cannot join with others online to share this communion experience, nor is there a chat area or BBS to talk about your experiences after the ceremony. Finally, although communion is a ritual action, in this case, the interactivity of the event is limited. People may click on a hyperlink and scroll down a webpage to read a pretext message for the ceremony, but the majority of the activity occurs offline with the drinking of the juice and the eating of the bread. Due to these factors, despite the e-communion ceremony at the Church of the Simple Faith being an “online ritual activity”, it is not really a form of online religion.

This case demonstrates that just because the church or organization is stating that they are providing an “e-service”, does not mean that they have opened up the medium to accommodate

²³ Website of Church of the Simple Faith.org, from: <http://www.churchofthesimplefaith.org>.

any type of virtual reality ceremony. In the case of the Church of the Simple Faith, they are providing a ritual pretext and not an environment where a ceremony can take place online. What is occurring in this type of situation is that the organization is providing information to be used in the off-line world. Although there is interactivity involved by clicking on hyperlinks, the Internet medium is still being used to provide information, one-to-many communication, and religion online. Although on the surface, Father John Missing's Creation Spirituality Celebration Circle event and the e-communion from the Church of the Simple Faith both appear to be online rituals, it is only the former that is clearly a form of online religion.

The online religion environment allows people to live their religious beliefs and practices through the Internet medium itself. This requires significantly more than just the ability to click hyperlinks and receive information. Returning to the theoretical work of Clifford Geertz, it is clear that religion functions in a number of ways and has a number of characteristics. His formal definition of religion states, "A religion is: (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic".²⁴

In order for religion to accomplish what Geertz believes it does, it must be accepted and embraced by those involved to the point that it becomes a template for establishing meaning within their lives.²⁵ To do this, religion must function as a cultural system. It must be such a part of the person's life that they interpret their events and experiences in relation to their religious worldview. In effect, there is no separation in their environment between the religious and the non-religious because their beliefs account for all of their experiences and influence the manner in which they interpret all their life activities.

In the case of online religion, people are living their religion on and through the Internet medium. For those individuals who participate in online religious activity, there is no separation between their offline life and experiences and their online life and experiences, and their religious activities and worldview permeate both environments. For those people who practice online religion, the Internet is not some place 'other' but recognized as a part of their everyday life and they are merely extending their religious meaning and activity into this environment.

²⁴ Geertz 1966, 4.

²⁵ See Geertz 1966, 40.

With this framework in mind, the ideal online religious environment would provide both information (Geertz's "models of" and "models for") and also an area where this information can be lived. This is happening on the WWW as websites try to incorporate both an information zone and interaction zone in a single site or more commonly where popular unofficial websites provide the area for online religion while the official religious website supplies religion online. In cases where institutional religious organizations do not support online religion it may be due to their perception of the Internet as a tool for communicating rather than an extension of our social world. Most likely they do not view the Internet as an environment where people "do" religion. They may believe that it is an acceptable medium for providing information but that any actual religious activity should be undertaken offline. However, this perception may be changing rapidly. As the WWW and Internet communication continue to develop as a social space, it is very probable that organized religious institutions will begin to develop environments for online religion. However, there will still be significant issues concerning the type of participation they will allow for and the types of communication that will occur. Hierarchies and networks are two very different systems and the Internet was really developed for only one of them.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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SPIRITUALISING THE INTERNET

UNCOVERING DISCOURSES AND NARRATIVES OF RELIGIOUS INTERNET USAGE

HEIDI CAMPBELL

In 2001 the first international conference on religion and the Internet was held at the University of Copenhagen in Denmark. *Religious Encounters in Digital Networks* brought together researchers from around the world to discuss their studies of religion online. In the concluding session the conference organisers made a call for “more serious research” and reflection into emerging expressions religiosity and rituals online. Since then several texts have been published that took root at this conference.¹ This demonstrates the seriousness to which many scholars have taken this need for detailed investigation of religious engagement online. Still, however, much work remains at the level of documenting and defining the phenomenon of religion online. Little theoretical work exists that provides frameworks for explaining online religious activities in terms of larger social and cultural processes. A need exists for studies that not only define what happens when religion appears online, but also interpret why this is occurring and the implications for religious culture as a whole. This involves investigating questions such as what does a religious group’s conception of the Internet influence how they negotiate it’s use, and what do these perceptions link to trends in contemporary society and the role of religion in culture as a whole. This call also places importance on recognising distinct processes occurring within religious groups that influence their adoption and adaptation of the Internet to meet the group’s specific needs or desires.

In light of this, this article seeks to investigate how Internet users conceive and speak of the Internet, in order to introduce it as suitable for religious use. This involves identifying the common discourses employed by religious users that conceptualize the Internet for acceptable use, and the narratives of use that emerge from these discourses. This process is defined as the ‘spiritualising of the Internet’, a framing process I have observed many groups of religious user undergo in order to explain why they engage in spiritual activities,

¹ See Dawson & Cowan 2004; Højsgaard & Warburg 2005.

THE DEATH OF A VIRTUAL MUSLIM DISCUSSION GROUP
ISSUES AND METHODS IN ANALYSING
RELIGION ON THE NET

GÖRAN LARSSON

It is often stated that the new information and communication technologies have changed the world. With the development of the Internet, for example, it has become much easier to communicate with loved ones and business colleagues, no matter when or where. From this point of view, these new technologies have proved theorists such as Roland Robertson and Zigmunt Bauman right in their predictions about processes of globalisation.¹ Today the world is truly one globalised space, at least for those of us who have access to, and know how to make use of, the new technologies, as well as enjoying the ability to travel all over the world. Together with economic and social changes, it is also clear that the new technologies have changed the world of religion. For example, with the help of a computer with access to the Internet, it is nowadays possible for an individual to explore an almost unlimited number of religious homepages providing both plausible and implausible world views. On the one hand this development can be seen as an opportunity to liberate the individual from his or her social context or cultural bonds. On the other hand, the same development can be seen as a threat to theological order and religious authority. From this point of view, the Internet is merely fostering relativism and sectarianism, thus leaving the individual in an existential void. With the help of information downloaded from the Internet, it is both easy and safe to create one's own interpretations by cutting and pasting. In general, to be able to choose one's own way of life and world view is something positive. However, and this is the reverse of the coin, making a choice is often difficult and painful. According to Anthony Giddens, the necessity to make a large number of choices, not only in relation to mundane questions but also about how to live one's life, is creating growing anxiety among many people in the west.²

Although the impact of the Internet on western society is clear, many researchers in the emerging field of religion and media studies are asking for more empirical data before formulating grand theories on how the Internet is affecting and changing religious milieus and

¹ See for example Bauman 2000; Robertson 1992.

² See Giddens 1991.

discourses. As a response to this question, it is necessary to ask basic questions, such as what kind of web pages are out there? What kinds of information can be found on religion? In what ways is cyberspace being used to perform online rituals? What is the relationship between online and offline activities? To be able to answer some of these questions, it is first evident that we must continue to collect more data from the Internet and refine our theories and methods for analysing information in cyberspace. Secondly, the focus should not be on online activities alone. To develop research on religion and the Internet, it is also essential to combine online research with traditional fieldwork, participant observation and interviews. Only by combining online and offline research will it become possible, for example, to say anything substantial about how Internet users are bringing information and experiences from real life into cyberspace. Life on screen should therefore not be understood or analysed separately from experiences in real life. But it is also important to understand and document how and in what ways online discussions or information taken from the Internet are put to use away from it, in other contexts. For scholars interested in Islam and Muslims, for example, it is of great importance to determine the degree, to which Muslims follow, adhere to and make use of theological advice and *fatwas* that can be browsed and downloaded from the Internet.

Aims

This chapter focuses on activities and discussions that are formulated and articulated within an asynchronic Swedish Muslim discussion group on the Internet called *Sveriges Förenade Cyber Muslimer* (Sweden's United Cyber Muslims, henceforth SfCM). My aim is to analyse and contextualise the discussions that took place in this virtual site during a period of five months, from June to October 2004. How many messages were posted to SfCM? What kind of information did they contain? I shall also examine why the SfCM e-mail list seems to have lost much of its attraction over the past year. Are we therefore looking at a dying discussion list? The information used for this chapter is mainly taken from the messages posted to SfCM, but I have also conducted interviews with list administrators and the most active participant in the list.³

³ By 'most active', I am merely referring to the fact that this informant has posted most messages to the list during the five months that I followed the discussion group. However, the frequency of posting is not automatically an indication that the messages posted are of high quality. It is also possible to be an active member of SfCM without posting messages. A member who reads all the messages posted to the list could also be described as an active member. However, this kind of activity is not possible to measure merely by looking at the posted messages.

Ethical Considerations

To protect the integrity and identity of the members of SfCM, I have used fake identities when referring to specific discussions or posted messages. However, the name SfCM is authentic. To use the real name of the group poses no problems while the forum is closed. To be able to read or post messages to the group, however, it is necessary to be a member.

Background

SfCM was founded in 1996 by three Swedish converts to Islam who believed that the Internet should be used to spread what could be viewed as accurate information about Islam and Muslims. The driving motive behind SfCM was to create a platform and portal for Muslims and people interested in Islam to come together on the Internet. The founders were also eager to help other Muslims to establish themselves in cyberspace and spread information about Islam, no matter what their theological outlooks. The forum is therefore open to both Sunni and Shia Muslims.⁴ An online discussion list was registered to Yahoo groups on 06/11/1998. Today, that is, in December 2004, the number of members is 169 and the first language is Swedish.⁵ However, messages are regularly posted in Danish, Norwegian and English, too.

To join SfCM and to take part in the discussions, it is necessary to be accepted by the list administrator. Although SfCM is not an open forum, the policy seems to be rather relaxed and welcoming.⁶ However, to become a member, one must send a letter to the list administrator and state why you are interested in questions about Islam and Muslims. If you are not accepted or do not follow the guidelines posted by the group, you can be denied access to or be excluded from the forum. I have been a member of SfCM's discussion list since 01/11/2002, although – as already mentioned – this study is based on a close reading of the messages posted between June and October 2004. Nonetheless I believe that my long-term experience with the group is helpful in the analysis.

⁴ In general there are few conflicts between Sunni and Shia Muslims in SfCM, but during October tensions could be observed between two particular members, which among other things related to the fact that one of the members was a Sunni and the other a Shia. However, this way of putting the argument and stressing differences between Sunni and Shia Muslims was criticised by another member, who argued that it was only God who could judge man. See message posted on 10/25/2004.

⁵ This information was retrieved from the website of SfCM on 12/13/2004.

⁶ This analysis is both supported by Schmidt 1999, 109, and the SfCM statement published on the website of the group.

Messages

The great advantage with most electronic discussion forums on the Internet is that the posted messages are preserved and are often available in digital archives. The capacity of computers to preserve a large quantity of data makes longitudinal analyses and studies much easier. For example, if messages are preserved, there is no problem in determining the number of messages posted or who is posting them or in retrieving their contents. Despite this possibility and the fact that SfCM has been analysed and discussed by scholars before this chapter, to my knowledge there is no systematic study of the messages posted to SfCM over a long period.⁷ All in all SfCM has been active for a period of seven years, but if we look at the number of messages posted to the group, its activities are declining.

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
2004	62	14	54	23	5	34	24	6	30	74	85	54
2003	62	140	63	54	125	145	167	190	204	207	142	93
2002	93	57	96	162	123	33	29	44	66	108	120	188
2001	223	429	191	135	70	235	93	63	276	202	210	61
2000	285	301	169	200	297	149	61	130	194	241	128	170
1999	207	95	170	140	213	112	126	78	95	261	247	221
1998						23	6	15	67	132	169	166

Table 1. Message history for SfCM from June 1998 to 12/14/2004. Source: <http://uk.groups.yahoo.com/group/sfcm/>

From the above table, it can be concluded that the number of messages posted has varied over time. In February 2001, 429 messages were posted and activity was intense. A high level of activity was more or less maintained until November 2003. From December 2003 activity fell, and during most of 2004 the number of messages posted was below fifty per month. However, during October and November 2004 a heated debate broke out between two members, and the number of messages went up. But the tone in the discussion was, according to some members, hostile and negative, especially since the verbal battle was fought during the month of Ramadan, a period of peace and reconciliation for most Muslims.⁸

⁷ SfCM has been studied by Schmidt 1999 and Larsson 2004.

Assalaamu alaykom (peace)

Happy Ramadan, all sisters and brothers in SfCM! It is not funny to see what kind of messages are being posted to the list. I do not think that we should write or read such angry messages, especially not during the month of fasting. There is nothing that weakens your faith more than to observe Muslims fighting Muslims, when brothers and sisters in faith are persecuted, oppressed, starved, tormented and dying all around the world! We should be preoccupied with other things than fighting over the Internet.⁹

Even though it is difficult to find a single driving explanation behind the reduction in the number of members, it is possible to suggest some preliminary explanations. According to Fatima, the list administrator, the activities in SfCM have declined for two reasons. First, the terrorist attack on the United States on 09/11/2001 is believed to have had a negative impact on the discussion climate. Although the number of messages was high after 09/11 – more than 200 were posted from September to December 2001 – according to Fatima many contributors became more cautious in discussing Islamic issues on the Internet. Some participants also warned members of SfCM that they were not alone in cyberspace and that non-Muslims could easily monitor the discussion forum, especially individuals with critical or negative views of Islam and Muslims or the security police. However, in another study I have shown that 09/11 also gave rise to a more active climate of discussion among Muslims in Sweden. After 09/11, for example, it became more important to discuss the essence of being Muslim.¹⁰ But the discussions documented in this study were mainly reserved for internal debates and arguments in mosques or among Muslim friends. Even though SfCM is a closed forum, most members are well aware of the fact that online discussions can easily be monitored and that others may use fake identities to become members. To discuss delicate and complex issues on the Internet might therefore be dangerous or difficult, and the information could easily be used to discredit Muslims living in Sweden.

A second reason given by Fatima is that the number of discussion forums has increased, with many Muslims joining other online groups in Sweden and around the world.¹¹ Although this development has drained the climate of discussion in SfCM it is an illustration of how competition between various Muslim interpretations and branches is fertilising Islamic discussions in Europe and the United States. Because of migration, a large variety of Islamic interpretations co-exist side by side today in most western cities. The multicultural society

⁸ Three messages were composed on 10/22/2004 on this subject.

⁹ Message posted to SfCM on 10/22/2004.

¹⁰ On how Muslims in Sweden were affected by 09/11, see Larsson 2003a. In this study there are data supporting the fact that the climate of discussion had been affected and encouraged by the terrorist attack on the United States; see Larsson 2003a, 33-4; Larsson 2005.

¹¹ Personal e-mail from Fatima dated 09/14/2004.

therefore accommodates both pluralism and competition, as well as tensions and conflicts. Although this is a complex process to analyse, the growing number of transnational Islamic organisations appears to have been stimulated by migration, the rise of the multicultural society and the use of new information and communication technologies.¹² But this competition is by no means restricted to cyberspace, and similar developments can easily be observed among Islamic institutions in Europe and the United States. The growing number of Islamic institutions and the diversity of Islamic opinions that can be located on the Internet is, in all its complexity, an illustration of the fact that Islam as a religion is truly globalised and transnational. The growing competition and diversity of Islamic voices can be understood either as something positive and liberating for Muslims or as a serious problem that is destroying religious authority and Islamic traditions. On SfCM, therefore, criticism of what are considered wrong interpretations of Islam is often voiced.¹³ In a message posted on 09/09/2004, for example, Fatima criticises another Swedish discussion forum for Muslims called *Simbad*.¹⁴ In her view, this site is not good for Muslims because it fosters Islamism and radical interpretations of Islam. According to Fatima, the opinions articulated within *Simbad* are destructive for the whole Muslim community and give Muslims a bad name in public discourse because it depicts Muslims as nothing but fanatics and radicals.¹⁵

However, to be able to say anything substantial about SfCM, it is necessary to refine our tools and develop a typology to analyse the messages.

The Typology

Although a typology might be a helpful analytical tool, it is my firm belief that we should not regard typologies as fixed: they should always be open to criticism and modification. It is also important to remember that the boundaries between the categories are floating and open to interpretation. Having said this, I suggest that the messages posted to SfCM be divided into five broad categories corresponding to Wendy Griffin's typology for analysing online discussion groups. In her study of the Goddess Net, Griffin divides her data up according to a typology consisting of five discourses: a discourse of purpose; a discourse of activism; a

¹² See, for example, Mandaville 2003, 141; Eickelman & Andersson 2003.

¹³ This issue was especially debated during October and November 2004.

¹⁴ See website of Simbad at <http://www.sindbad.se/phpBB2/>.

¹⁵ Message posted to SfCM on 09/09/2004.

discourse of shared information; a discourse of theology and meaning; and a discourse of care and connection.¹⁶

In the first category, discourses of purpose, we find messages containing information about demonstrations, educational classes, teaching materials, online references (links, videos, and articles) and practical information for Muslims living in Sweden. Since this is a general and broad category, it received a large number of messages during the five months that I was closely following SfCM. In this category we find, for example, messages recommending homepages that contain ‘good’ examples of recitations from the Koran, that is, audio files,¹⁷ information about offline study groups that read Imam an-Nawawî’s *Kitab al-Adhakar*,¹⁸ and information about *hijab*-exchange parties for Muslim women.¹⁹ One example that belongs to this category was posted on 10/2/2004:

I hope that this letter finds you well! I am posting information about a girl camp that will focus on integration – martial arts – health. The last camp I organized was a great success, and both Muslim and Swedish girls came together and connected nicely. The main purpose was to put an end to the prejudice that all Muslim girls are suppressed.²⁰

In category two, the discourse of activism, we find messages that call for activism and for general moral uplift among Muslims. Here we find, for example, messages questioning the legal basis and political position of the Saudi Arabian regime. Its theological foundation is frequently discussed within this category. In relation to this topic, we also find references to several global and international Muslim networks that have joined together in their criticism of the Saudi Arabian government. For example, on 06/04/2004 an appeal from the Supreme Council of America was posted with an appeal for a “Halt to Saudi desecrations: secret campaign to destroy revered monuments from time of Prophet Muhammad”.²¹ Although the external material – links and homepages referred to in the discussion of SfCM – comes from a large number of different political and theological contexts, this material is of great importance in our analysis. With the help of this information, it is possible to re-create and obtain a picture of the theological milieu that dominates or hold an important place within the discussion group. What kind of theological interpretations and groups are being discussed, and what kinds of interpretations are the members of SfCM supporting? Although this

¹⁶ See Griffin 2004, 196-200. The fourth category in Griffin’s typology is called ‘a discourse of thea/ology and meaning’, but since this does not apply to Islamic discourses I have slightly modified the typology and simply called it a discourse of theology and meaning.

¹⁷ Message posted on 06/20/2004.

¹⁸ Message posted on 06/22/2004.

¹⁹ Message posted on 09/29/2004.

²⁰ Message posted on 10/02/2004.

material is important, it is necessary to be cautious in our interpretation. For example, a reference to a certain group or a specific theological interpretation should not automatically be taken as a sign that all members in the discussion forum uphold or share the same references. Nonetheless it is important to document and analyse what kinds of sources are being referred to and which theologians are being mentioned in the messages posted.

Documenting and analysing the sources used in the debate is vital because it says a lot about the prevailing theological and political context and the formulation of living Islam in Europe. In the debates that take place on SfCM's discussion list, for example, it is possible to follow and analyse the tension between so-called traditional views of Islam and reform interpretations of Islam, especially ideas belonging to the Salafiyya tradition.²² Arguments between followers of the *philosophia perennis* and traditional Sufis are another source of conflict and debate within SfCM.²³

Although these kinds of tensions and discussions are by no means limited to cyberspace, online discussion groups provide important material for documenting and analysing the tensions and internal arguments that are taking place in Muslim communities today. It is also of particular importance to analyse online forums because the discussions that take place in cyberspace are not only run by educated theologians. In cyberspace, ordinary Muslims have a new opportunity to participate and contribute to the discussion alongside the *ulama*. As already mentioned, this development contains both new possibilities and new problems, especially for the *ulama*, who believe that they will lose control over the theological message and its interpretation. Although information and communication technologies potentially provide the individual with new opportunities to be his or her own interpreter, it is necessary to remember that gender, age and education also play important roles in cyberspace. From a critical point of view, it is necessary to be cautious and critical of the most euphoric voices who argue that the Internet will remove all restrictions and solve all problems for humankind. The technology does not make all people equal and neutral; this is a utopian misunderstanding based on expectations, not hard evidence.

If we turn now to Griffin's third category, the discourse of shared information, we find both questions and answers being posted to SfCM. Contrary to Griffin's findings, it is quite usual for members to ask for advice or direct information about a specific Islamic topic. A message posted on 4 October may serve as an illustration of this: "I would like to get hold of a

²¹ Message posted on 06/04/2004.

²² See Larsson 2005.

²³ This issue was intensively debated during October and November 2004.

copy of the book *Kitab manzil as-sa'irin*, by Shaykh Abdullah al-Ansari al-Herawi. If anyone recognises it and knows how I can get hold of it, please contact me.”²⁴

Although the difference between my study and Griffin's should not be exaggerated, one explanation could be that Muslims are more used to raising questions concerning their beliefs. For example, the issuing of *fatwas* is very important today, especially for Muslims living in Europe and the United States. To raise questions or ask a more knowledgeable person something is an essential part of Islam and Muslim identity. This development is evident on the Internet, and today it is easy to find a large number of Islamic homepages providing and issuing *fatwas*. The homepage of IslamOnline.net, which is located in Cairo and Qatar, is one important example of a site that provides this service. At the time of writing, this site's fatwabank contains approximately 12,000 *fatwas* in Arabic and 3,000 *fatwas* translated into English.²⁵ Together with offline institutions such as the *European Council for Fatwa and Research* located in Dublin, Ireland, IslamOnline.net seems to be one of the most important forums for Muslims in the west.²⁶ If we return to the typology, the following Muslim man asking for advice from SfCM before going Turkey on vacation provides an example illustrating the discourse of shared information.

My wife and I are thinking about going to Turkey this year, and we know that there are places where beaches and cities are not packed with westerners who party, but also quieter places, even special hotels for Muslims with separated bathing facilities for men and women (as in Dubai), and even Islamic entertainment. Is there anybody who knows of this kind of place, especially hotels in Turkey...?²⁷

This question is likely to be of great significance to the individual, but this does not normally cause much debate or dispute inside the group. Nevertheless, the ability to raise and answer questions online is important in the creation of identity and for individual guidance. Contrary to offline milieus such as mosques or Koranic schools, the Internet is an environment in which all individuals may claim to possess knowledge or authority for both good and bad. It is also possible to remain anonymous on the Internet, thus making it easier and safer to raise difficult questions. But the possibility to become a cyber *'alim* without possessing 'true' or classical knowledge of the sciences of Islam, that is, knowledge transmitted via mosques or Islamic institutions of learning, is often questioned or disputed by Muslims. According to opponents, information and communication technologies tend to undermine theological

²⁴ Message posted on 10/04/2004.

²⁵ Interview with Ali Halawani, head of the Shariah unit in Cairo, Egypt, on 06/14/2004.

²⁶ For IslamOnline.net, see <http://www.islam-online.net/english/index.shtml>; for the homepage of the European Council of Fatwa and Research, see <http://www.ecfr.org/>.

authority. In the words of Sheikh Muhammad Muslim, the theological leader of *Sidratul-Muntaha*, a Sufi-oriented group in Sweden that makes much use of the Internet, there is no *adab*, courtesy or rules, for using the Internet.²⁸

In the fourth category, the discourse of theology and meaning, Griffin places messages that have the potential to become arguments. Within this category, most arguments occur when a particular message makes assumptions about the uniformity of beliefs of other list participants.²⁹ In the case of SfCM, this kind of assumption was made quite often about list members following the ideas of Salafism or traditionalist interpretations. The methodologies applied by various scholars in defining the essence and truth of Islam is one of the most common themes discussed within SfCM. A debate between a follower of Sufism (*tasawwuf*) and *philosophia perennis* can serve as an illustration:

Warning! Beware of the poison that is being spread by some of the so-called perennialists. Their interpretation of Islam is a deviation from the *aqida* (faith) of the Sunni Muslims. It has nothing to do with *tasawwuf*. It is a religion in its own right that has taken some of its terms and names from Islam. Those of us who are looking for a diamond should beware of glass pearls. May Allah protect the Muslims and humankind from false interpretations of our religion. Allah knows best.³⁰

The quotation also shows that the climate of discussion can be very hard. For example, after a long and critical discussion between two members, the sincerity of one of the participants in SfCM was even questioned in public: ‘Maybe you are not a Muslim? Only Allah knows.’³¹

Category four is complex to analyse, and it is often difficult to maintain the boundaries between the typologies applied by Griffin and myself. Messages that belong to category two, the discourse of purpose, for example, are frequently developed into questions of theology and meaning (i.e. category four).

As for the last category, the discourse of care and connection, SfCM provides hardly any example of this kind of message. However, sometimes new members are welcomed to the group, and converts to Islam have received special support. An illustration of this category is when a member gives his support to another member and reveals that he also finds the question of authenticity of the *hadith* problematic and important to discuss in a critical and open way.³² Unlike participants who strongly uphold the position of the *hadith*, this message

²⁷ Message posted on 06/14/2004.

²⁸ Interview with Mohammad Muslim, Göteborg, Bok- och Biblioteksmässan, on 26/09/2003.

²⁹ See Griffin 2004, 197.

³⁰ Message posted on 10/16/2004.

³¹ Message posted on 10/21/2004.

³² Message posted on 09/19/2004.

is written with care and connects with the person who raised the question. But in general the messages posted to SfCM contain little or no information of a personal character, and from this point of view my findings are different from Griffin's.

When Griffin's typology is applied, it becomes painfully clear that the boundaries between the categories are floating and very difficult to maintain. A message could easily be placed in more than one category at the same time. This said, the 168 messages posted between June and October 2004 can roughly be divided as follows:

Category	Posted messages
Discourse of purpose	43
Discourse of activism	11
Discourse of shared information	43
Discourse of theology and meaning	62
Discourse of care and connection	9
Total	168

Table 2: Typology of messages posted between June and September 2004

The problem in maintaining Griffin's typology also illustrates the fact that a typology is only a tool for analysing the data collected, not an exact instrument that solves all methodological problems.

Another way of analysing the data is to focus on who is posting messages and why? This makes it clear that most messages to SfCM have been posted by just a few individuals. During the five months in which I was following the discussions closely, the average member of SfCM posted only one or two messages. This is an indication that most discussions were run by just a few members. Between June and October 2004, the most active participants had the following posting profile:

Name	Number of posted messages	Messages as a percentage
Abu Bakr	47	28%
Umar	34	20%
Fatima	10	6%
Uthman	9	5%
Ali	4	2%
Hussein	4	2%
Total	108	64%

Table 3: The six most active members in SfCM between June and September 2004.

In total six individuals, those mentioned in the table, posted 108 messages out of a total of 168. In percentage terms, communication by these individuals made up 64 % of the total number of messages posted to SfCM. Although this information says something about the climate of discussion and the importance of driving members, the data need to be analysed with care. For example, it is possible to be a passive or silent member and still take part in the discussions by reading messages without posting any. But this kind of activity is impossible to measure just by looking at the number of messages posted. To develop this discussion further, it would be necessary to conduct interviews with both active and passive members.

What about the Members?

To develop the analysis further, it is clear that the members themselves must be approached and asked why they are active or passive and what they think about the discussion group. However, for this study I have only been in e-mail contact with the list administrator and Abu Bakr, the member who posted the most messages during the five months that I have been following SfCM. I have also tried to make contact with Umar, the second most active member, but he has not returned my mail.

Even though Abu Bakr's contribution within the group is considerable and important, it should be stressed that his profile and answers should not be seen as typical or representative of all members of the discussion group. In her study of SfCM, Garbi Schmidt concludes that the average member is a young convert to Islam.³³ Although this conclusion is plausible, one

³³ See Schmidt 1999, 120.

must be cautious in interpreting the data. For example, it is not possible to conclude whether a member is a Muslim or not just by looking at the nicknames used in the discussion group. On the Internet it is very easy to use fake identities, especially in discussion groups. By doing so it is easy to hide one's true identity, gender or age.³⁴ The true identity of Abu Bakr has even been questioned by another member in SfCM, the critic being doubtful whether Abu Bakr is even a Muslim,³⁵ a charge which is, of course, refuted by Abu Bakr.

Cyberspace is also the ultimate forum for presenting an idealised image of the individual. For example, in a Muslim discussion group it may be important for a member to emphasise his or her belief in Islam. What contributors say online should therefore not automatically be taken as a guarantee that they are following and practising the same ideals offline. However, both the history of the discussion group and communication within SfCM support the view that a large number of members are converts to Islam, like Fatima, the present list administrator, and Abu Bakr, the most active member.³⁶

Although much research on the use of information and communication technologies supports the idea that young people are more frequent users than older people, one should be cautious in analysing these findings. In an earlier survey sent out to a large number of Swedish Muslim homepages, for example, the average age profile of the webmasters was between thirty-four and thirty-five.³⁷ Although this is a small sample and the study being referred to had several methodological problems, I believe it suggests that older Muslims are also using the Internet nowadays to search for information on Islam. For example, Abu Bakr, the most active member in SfCM and the member who posts most messages to the group, is over fifty. This indicates that we should not automatically draw the conclusion that only young Muslims can use the new medium.

Conclusion

The fact that a Muslim group in Sweden is using the Internet to communicate and share information about Islam illustrates the globalisation of Islam. Not only the choice of communication media, but also the number of languages used and the topics discussed within SfCM indicate that Muslims in Sweden are part of a globalised and transnational Muslim

³⁴ On the use of nicknames in Muslim discussion forums and on the Internet, see Barak 2002.

³⁵ Message posted on 10/21/2004.

³⁶ Personal e-mail, dated 10/04/2004.

³⁷ See Larsson 2003b, 230.

community. By using information and communication technologies, members of SfCM are on the one hand linked to the rest of the Muslim world and on the other hand contributing to the creation of Muslim space in northern Europe. To be able to understand and analyse Muslims in Sweden, it is not sufficient to confine one's studies to the Swedish context alone. We should also use data from the rest of the Muslim world, a fact clearly illustrated in my analysis of SfCM.

New information and communication technologies, such as satellite television, telephone, radio and the Internet, have allowed the world to come to Sweden and made the world a much smaller place. What happens in Bosnia, Saudi Arabia or Palestine is repeatedly being discussed on SfCM. Global events such as 09/11 and developments in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are today global news with a strong impact on local religious and ethnic minorities living in the west. Although the majority of Muslims living in Sweden are not followers or supporters of Usama bin Laden, it is evident that the terrorist attacks on the United States had a negative impact on most Muslim communities in Europe and the United States. Consequently, after 09/11 the level of discrimination against Muslims skyrocketed in most countries in the west.³⁸ This indicates that the new information and communication technologies contain both opportunities and problems for Muslim communities.

Only time can tell whether SfCM will disappear or become a permanent virtual institution for Swedish Muslims. According to Lorne L. Dawson, time is also an important criterion in deciding whether a discussion group should be called a virtual community. An investment of time and care is essential in establishing a community on the Internet. From the data discussed in this chapter, it is not possible to say whether SfCM should be labelled a virtual community or not. Nonetheless it is evident that the discussion forum has been around for a long time. When it started in 1998 it was one of the first Swedish Muslim sites on the Internet, its founders having been pioneers in using the new information and communication technologies to spread information about Islam in Sweden.

Although SfCM was the first Swedish Muslim discussion group, it is not the only homepage that has been around for a long time. Many Swedish Muslim homepages have existed for quite a long time, several since the end of the 1990s. Abu Bakr, the most active member of SfCM, is an illustration of the continuity. For example, he has been a member of SfCM for more than five years.³⁹ Although it is impossible to say whether he is representative of the discussion group or of Swedish Muslims using the Internet, he is an example of a Muslim

³⁸ See Larsson 2005.

³⁹ Personal e-mail, dated 10/05/2004.

who is using the Internet to search for information about Islam and to articulate his Muslim identity. All in all, the messages posted to SfCM and my contact with Fatima and Abu Bakr support the idea that Muslims are going online because they are eager to discuss and meet other Muslims in cyberspace. From this point of view, SfCM could be used as a tool for creating an identity and solidarity among Muslims living in Scandinavia.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ See Schmidt 1999, 119-20; personal e-mail from Fatima, dated 09/14/2004; personal e-mail from Abu Bakr, 10/05/2004.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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form religious relationships or seek spiritual information online. Spiritualising the Internet means the Internet is seen as a technology or space that is suitable for religious engagement, whereby allowing users to include Internet-based activities into rhythm of their spiritual lives.

In many ways the process of users framing a technology in order to make it suitable for use Internet is not unique. New technologies have often been described and redesigned by users, in order for them to more easily be incorporated into the life practices of a group or community. The study of the social shaping of technology (SST) is a research area — linked to fields such as science and technology studies, sociology of technology, and media studies — that examines technological change and user innovation as a social process.

In order to understand how religious users shape and negotiate the Internet for their purposes, or what will be referred to as the religious shaping of technology, this process is best describe through its relationship to the SST approach. SST offers insight into how distinct communities or groups of technology users have been studied. It also sets the stage for considering how religious users shape technology towards their goals and desire. This provides insight into why Internet technology might be interpreted through a social-religious shaping of technology paradigm. This discussion leads to outlining what is being called the ‘spiritualising of Internet’ framing process. Here four common discourses used by religious Internet users to conceive of and describe Internet, along with four corresponding narratives of religious Internet use are introduced. These discourses and narratives of use have been identified through seven years of observation and qualitative study of various expressions of religion found online. In this work special attention has been given to why and how different religious groups use the Internet. Though this research has predominately been in case studies of religious use of the Internet within the Christian tradition these discourses and narratives have resonance with Internet use within other religious traditions. The discourse strategies and corresponding narratives provide a range of religious responses to the Internet, and may provide a template for studying the framing process of religious groups in general.

How Users Shape Technology

The claim, that religious users frame Internet technology in distinct ways, needs to be situated within a larger area of academic discourse. In the past two decades numerous

studies about technological user groups have emerged within an area of study referred to as the social shaping of technology (SST). This approach challenges technologically deterministic paradigms, which often assume technology is an all-powerful force and has its own internal technical logic. Instead SST views technology as a product of the interplay between technical and social factors in both design and use.² Technology is seen as a social process, this means it is possible for different social groups of users to shape technologies towards their own ends by the ways they use or modify a given technology. Different social groups may employ a given technology in unique ways, in order that their use maintains or reinforces certain patterns of group life.

A variety of approaches have been used to study the social use and socialisation of technology within public and private spaces. Each studies different choices available or roles at various stage of the innovation and design process from a user-oriented perspective.³ These include looking at issues of gender and technology (sexual divisions of labour and use), domestication (use in everyday life), configuring of the user (role of user in design), constructivist technology assessment (anticipating social effects and needs of users to provide feedback into the design stage) and social informatics (uses and consequences of IT within institution and cultural contexts). Each focus allows researchers to explore in detail certain aspects of user choices and technological negotiation. One interesting example, which has relevance to how religious user groups may negotiate a new technology, is the domestication approach

In domestication the central concern is considering how technology has been adopted into the social sphere. Technology is seen as becoming en-cultured or embedded in every day life, especially the life of the home, in order to function. Roger Silverstone, Eric Hirsch and David Morley pioneered the “domestication” of technologies approach arguing technologies are conditioned and tamed by users in ways that enable them to fit more neatly into the routines of daily life or “the moral economy of the household”.⁴ Households are not homogeneous; they involve a complex social dynamic of different genders, generations and classes resulting in negotiated “moral economy”. Moral economies are spaces where symbolic meaning transactions occur. Domesticating a technology or artefact means making choices about the meaning and practice of a technology within this sphere. Thus a technology is cultured by the culture in which it lives and by the agents who utilise it.

² See MacKenzie & Wajcman 1985.

³ See Williams & Edge 1996, 856-899.

⁴ See Silverstone & Hirsch & Morley 1992, 15-31.

Domestication shows how one may interpret the values of a closed community in relation to their choice concerning technology and how/why they incorporate it into their daily lives. This is of special relevance to religious shaping of technology especially in relation to groups that have tight boundaries, and where community values play an important role in the negotiation process. An example of applying the domestication approach to study of technology in a religious community is the work of Diane Zimmerman-Umble on Amish use and relationship to the telephone.⁵ She re-frames the Amish's perceived rejection of technology by arguing that it is not that the Amish community sees technology as evil, rather they choose as a community to resist certain patterns of life they see as being reinforced through the use of certain technologies. Instead of rejecting all use of the telephone, the Amish choose to resist how use may interfere with valued patterns of family life by privatising communication. The telephone is domesticated by becoming a communal rather than an individual resource, phones being shared by a number of families and located in a central location, such as a phone being placed in a shed at the intersection of several farms. In this way they reconstruct technology by situating it in the community, thus allowing use while still affirming their values about maintaining distance from secular society. The domestication approach highlights how a particular group can tame a technology to fit into a particular social or even religiously cultured space.

SST highlights that technology is embedded in a social process of negotiation between individuals or groups who inevitably shape them towards their own desire and values. Domestication of technology provide helpful starting point accentuating how user's motivations and choices influence the use of technology. The SST tradition thus provides a starting point and tools for exploring issues of how users interact and shape technology. This also provides insight into how one might begin to contextualise religious users shaping of technology.

While an example of how domestication has been applied to the study of a religious group's use of technologies, this is a notable exception within SST studies. Overall limited work has been done considering how religion shapes technology, let alone considering how religious use frames the Internet. Therefore, an examination of how technology and religious users are being studied outside SST must be considered in order to move closer to understanding the religious shaping of technology.

⁵ See Zimmerman-Umble 1992, 183-194.

The Religious Shaping of Technology

Religion is an area that has been often overlooked in many technology studies. Yet religion still plays a key role in the social construction of cultural spaces. Religion here refers to organised systems of spiritual beliefs. What I am most concerned with in this paper is how traditional religious groups are influenced by new media technology and how they negotiate technological interaction with their religious beliefs. It is important to recognize that religious groups still have significant influence within different cultures and social settings, and can effect the adoption, rejection or adaptation of a technology within that space. Therefore special consideration should be given to how religious users shape technologies towards their own ends to meet specific needs or desires.

I argue that the choices of religious users about technology, especially those within traditional religions (such as Islam, Christianity, Judaism), are negotiated through different ways than those within other social groups. This is because choices within religious groups are guided not just by needs and desires, but occur within the framework of a distinct worldview laden with spiritual meanings and values. This structure guides how they interpret the world. Traditional religious groups often see the world as composed of that which is sacred and that which is profane or secular. Their desire is to engage and interact with the sacred and shun, or at least distance themselves from the secular. For many conservative religious groups religious practice and lifestyle become shaped by rejection of modernity, which is seen as being secular.

Technology becomes a problematic area, as it is often equated with modernity. If technology is not rejected outright for this reason, it must undergo negotiation within the community so it can become acceptable for use or shaped in ways that allow it to be included within the sacred part of life. This process of this negotiation depends on the traditions and narratives of the religious community. It can include conducting certain rituals to 'sanctify' or set-apart the technology for religious use, or issuing official statements that present the technology in acceptable ways to the group. For groups that in general see technology use as less problematic or compatible with a religious lifestyle this negotiation may simply be members modelling appropriate use within the community and leaders praising certain forms of practice while discouraging other uses.

Two recent studies of Internet use within conservative Jewish religious communities demonstrate more explicitly how religious groups negotiate technology in order to make its

use acceptable within the practices and beliefs of the religious community. They highlight specifically, the role of language and advocating particular uses of the technology in this process of legitimisation. Together they highlight important factors in studying the religious shaping of technology.

The religious shaping of technology involves a strong linguistic framing element, as illustrated by Oren Livio and Keren Tenenboim's study of the discursive processes of women Internet users within the Ultra-Orthodox community in Israel.⁶ The Ultra-Orthodox is a small conservative religious community in Israel, about 6 percent of the total population of seven million. They are characterised by their rejection of the values of modernity, following a strict rule of life and wearing the dress of their ancestors of 18th century Europe. Technology is often seen as a symbol of modernity and secular values, which they consciously distance themselves from. Thus use of technology is a point of great debate and law making within the community. Discussions about technology use are often framed in terms of possibilities and dangers, from discussing the boundaries of how electrical appliances might be used on Shabbat (Jewish sacred day of the week) to forbidding televisions in homes as the epitome of secular values and entertainment.

Livio and Tenenboim found women who used the Internet for work-related tasks⁷ identified four discursive strategies employed for legitimising use. These included framing the Internet in binary opposition in order to distinguish the technology from the content, separating personal and societal effects, drawing on acceptable justifications such as statements of religious officials (i.e. approval from rabbi) or depoliticising use by denying subversive implication of the technology. An interesting claim made by several women in their study was that "the Internet will not change us". They justified this claim stating Internet use can be controlled (when it is used and what is done online) and made compatible with their form of life, so as not to challenge the beliefs of the community. Yet this was said while describing experiences of the Internet allowing them freedom of expression and empowerment unavailable to them in their community. In general, they found the women interviewed deliberately spoke of Internet technology in ways that framed it as compatible with community values (allowing them to work at home) and

⁶ See Livio & Tenenboim 2004.

⁷ It is important to note in Ultra-Orthodox homes the woman is typically the primary wage earner, as men must hold to a strict regime of religious study limiting their possibilities for work and income. Women are responsible for the home, child rearing and work to support the family. Thus work that can be done in the home is seen as desirable and encouraged by the community. For this reason some early bans on Internet use by different rabbis and communities have been negotiated in order to allow women to do work that requires them to use computers or the Internet.

affirmed communication patterns (requiring active participation by users and the forced filtering of content).

Discursive framing strategies served an important role within the community, both framing public use and satisfying cognitive dissonance within many members about the danger of this technology. Language became a powerful tool for making a technology that was considered secular, acceptable within certain boundaries.⁸

Religious shaping of technology also involves framing certain uses, as well as the technology itself. Gad Barzilai and Karine Barzilai-Nahon in their study of religious fundamentalism and the Internet examine Ultra-Orthodox Internet users of *Hevre*⁹, an Israeli version of the *Classmates* web site¹⁰ that helps friends from the past connect. They found that while rabbis initially condemned use of Internet, religious people wanted to use the Internet for economic purpose and self-expression.¹¹ In looking especially at the way religious women used technology, their study found the Internet became a “cultured technology”. Female users shaped and conceived of the Internet in terms of needs. The Internet met particular needs within the community, enabling women to work at home. This led to a change in official views about the technology. Yet it also required the technology to be reshaped to fit within the boundaries and beliefs of the community’s culture. Within the Ultra-Orthodox community this meant framing the Internet as a “textual communication tool” that can encourage for traditional forms of communication, such as *Responsa* online (a traditional form of Question & Answer – ask the rabbi), accessing sermons, news and facilitating religious argumentation. For Barzilai and Barzilai-Nahon “cultured technology” becomes a social discourse which recognizes that religious cultural spaces are affected by both complex social and distinct value-construction processes. “The Internet becomes a set of various cultured technologies with a variety of cultural contexts”.¹² The extent to which a religious group can culture a technology, such as the Internet, indicates the extent to which it can be incorporate into the community and provide opportunities for group or self-expression within these boundaries.

Barzilai’s and Barzilai-Nahon’s idea of “cultured technology” proves helpful in moving towards a religious-SST approach. It recognizes that technology is shaped as it is domesticated to fit into users daily lives, and that use and design processes can be shaped

⁸ See Livio & Teneboim 2004.

⁹ See website of *Hevre*, from: <http://www.hevre.co.il>.

¹⁰ See website of *Classmates* from: <http://www.classmates.com>.

¹¹ See Barzilai & Barzilai-Nahon 2005.

¹² Barzilai & Barzilai-Nahon 2005.

by the values of the community. A religious community's recognition of their ability to 'culture' the Internet allows them to more easily incorporate it into the life of the group. This points to the fact that adoption of a technology by a user group, especially a religious one, can enable them to construct or affirm certain cherished values. It recognizes that technology use reshapes public and private boundaries, as technology serves to perform a particular role within the community that can promote or sustain certain values.

Spiritualising the Internet

Studying the religious shaping of technology involves considering how a technology is framed through users employing certain discourse strategies and promoting certain uses of the technology. I refer to this combination of linguistic legitimisation and pro-active culturing by religious groups as the 'spiritualising of technology'. This involves speaking and conceiving of technology in ways that allows it to be used in religious activities and spiritual life practices. Spiritualising technology involves creating and maintaining certain rhetoric about the technology that presents it as a space suitable for religious use and engagement. If, for instance, the technology is described as "created by God" or "part of God's world" it can be seen as part of creation which humanity is called to steward. Thus engaging with technology becomes not only permissible, but also a mandate.

However, if a technology is described as "secular" engagement with it becomes unacceptable and boundaries are built to maintain distance from its polluting influence. Thus the language and images surrounding a given technology either invite or forbid engagement, as well as shape the types of interact that are viewed as acceptable by a religious user. When studying religious users of technology it is important to note that choices made regarding technology are not simply utilitarian, but are marked by spiritual motivations and religious language. They are laden with distinct symbolic interpretations about the purpose and power behind the technology. This is especially true of the Internet. Spiritualising the Internet involves making religious value judgements and presenting them in language, which is accessible and acceptable to the community. It involves endowing the Internet with a particular narrative of meaning, which contextualises the purpose of the Internet and how it could or should serve religious users. The next section will unpack four common discourse strategies that have surfaced in my research relates to use of the Internet by traditional religious groups.

Religious Discourses Strategies Framing the Internet

The Internet has been described as a tool, a space, state of mind¹³ and a social network.¹⁴ It also has been referred to as a public discourse¹⁵ creating conversational communities as people try to explain and manage this new technology. Their community discourse creates boundaries of use and forms connections with other users. While the Internet presents new possibilities for work and communicative tasks, it is also used to re-connect people with the spiritual side of life. Yet in order to justify using the Internet for religious purposes, it often appears traditional religious groups and individuals employ particular rhetorical discourses or images of the Internet, describing it in ways that presents it as suitable for religious use or spiritual engagement. This process, as stated above, is being referred to as the spiritualising of the Internet. It involves the linguistic framing of the Internet that provides boundaries that can define its design and use.

Embedded in these discourses about the Internet are certain beliefs about the role and nature of the technology. They frame the Internet in a context that allows users to see it as sacred or part of the material world that can be used for religious pursuits. Spiritualising the Internet through certain discourses about Internet involves using religious language and images. They enable the Internet to be seen not simply as technologically constructed, but as a spiritual space or medium. The emergence of distinctly religious narratives about the Internet should not be surprising. This is an idea which I have explored in previous works, where I defined the Internet as a spiritual network or sacramental space and demonstrated how these have become growing and common conceptions about the Internet.¹⁶

Here, however, I wish to focus on several common religious discourses about Internet technology. They are employed to frame the Internet for religious use and are evidenced in current literature about religion online. Religious discourses about the Internet are used to define acceptable use and shape the types of religious rituals and practices that emerge online. These discourses also provide an apologetic for religious online engagement. In my observations and research of numerous online religious communities, and how traditional religious groups have employed the Internet for religious purpose, I have identified four common discourse strategies used to frame Internet technology. These include describing the Internet as: a spiritual medium facilitating religious experience, a sacramental space

¹³ See Markham 1998.

¹⁴ See Jones 1997, 7-32.

¹⁵ See Agre 1998.

¹⁶ See Campbell 2005; Campbell 2004c, 111-135.

suitable for religious use, a tool promoting religion or religious practice and a technology for affirming religious life. Each is outlined below in detail.

Spiritual Medium Facilitating Spiritual Experiences

The Internet as a spiritual medium is a discourse that presents the Internet as a technology possessing special qualities that facilitate spiritual experiences. Describing Internet as a spiritual medium interprets the technology as having within it the ability to alter individual and communal understanding of what it means to be spiritual as certain practices and meanings are brought online. The spiritual, or spirituality, refers to the human search for “meaning significance”.¹⁷ Contained within this discourse is the idea that the technology itself is an extension of the spiritual world and engagement with it will facilitate spiritual encounters.

Jennifer Cobb in *Cybergrace* (1998) develops this discourse when she attempts to present a “theology of cyberspace”. She argues the Internet facilitates a process or sacred journey leading us on a mystical path towards the Divine. By arguing, “the sacred is present in computers” she describes cyberspace as a place for society to find healing by reconnecting the spheres of science and religion. She highlights Teilhard de Chardin’s idea of the Omega point “where all layers of the universe are centred” and the noosphere, the space where “the concentration of pure consciousness and absolute unity” abides.¹⁸ Cobb suggests the Internet might be a manifestation of Chardin’s ideas and claims this perspectives enable the exploration of the Internet as a spiritual network. Engaging in cyberspace becomes an aid to humanity’s spiritual progression, as the Internet serves as an “important way station” on humanity’s journey towards a greater spiritual evolution.¹⁹ This is a prophetic discourse; going online will connect you with the spiritual. It argues that within the wires and connections of the Internet a conduit for the sacred is created, so religious use of the Internet is seen as a natural and expected part of engagement online.

¹⁷ See Jones & Wainwright & Yarnold 1986, 50.

¹⁸ See Cobb 1998, 97.

¹⁹ See Cobb 1998, 97.

Sacramental Space Suitable for Religious Use

The discourse of the Internet as sacramental space describes the Internet as a place that can be set apart for ‘holy use’ enabling people to describe online activities as part of their religious life. It is different from the spiritual medium discourse that presents that Internet as infused or wired to be a spiritual space. Instead it sees the Internet is not by nature a sacred space, but it can become so through designing the technology in distinct ways or through performing rituals that transform it into a place where the spiritual can be encountered. Spirituality is not embedded in Internet technology; rather it is consciously created or constructed. This discourse is often employed by people using the Internet to create online sacred environments such as cyber-churches, cyber-temples or virtual shrines. They consciously design these web sites as online spaces that reflect traditional religious settings and icons to give users the impression they have entered a sacred space. Sacramental use can also include conducting set online rituals, searching out religious information or forming religious communities. It also involves constructing online platforms that will allow or support spiritual practices.

This discourse is used in the work of Margaret Wertheim in *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace*. In it she argues cyberspace is a non-physical space allowing people to reconnect with ideas of the spiritual, immaterial world that have often been silenced by the dualistic cosmology of Western science. “The ‘spiritual’ appeal of cyberspace lies precisely in this paradox: It is a repackaging of the old idea of Heaven, but in a secular, technologically sanctioned format.”²⁰ Just as the gothic cathedrals of Europe were constructed with a distinct architecture (such as in the shape of a cross) and symbolic meaning (attempting to create an other-worldly setting that referenced heaven) so the designers of online spaces can use the technology to create forms that link to images of the sacred. She argues cyberspace has within it the potential for the sacred, so the Internet can be used to create a “holy space” that is set apart for religious use. The sacramental space discourse frames the Internet as having the potential to be constructed and consecrated for religious uses such as religious services or rituals. It argues the Internet can create a sacred space so it can be used for religious purposes.

²⁰ Wertheim 1999, 21.

Tool to Promote Religion and Religious Practice

The Internet is also described as a tool that can promote a given religion or religious practice. This discourse emphasizes that the Internet is a technological tool, and that how it is used is dependent on the motives and desires of its users and designers. As a tool it is seen as a neutral artefact. Thus it can be used for religious pursuits, as easily as it is used for informational or work related activities. Attention is placed on motivations behind the use. The Internet can be used to seek religious information and spiritual relationships or it can be used to reconfigure traditional religious activities so they can be pursued online.²¹

This discourse describes the Internet as a tool for promoting religious practices, or in some cases, presents the image of the Internet as a new terrain for proselytising endeavours. Walter Wilson exemplifies this in *The Internet Church* where he claims that through the Internet Christians “have the opportunity to reach every man, woman and child on the face of the earth in the next decade”, a phrase used three times in his book.²² Wilson stresses the ubiquity of Internet technology, its ability to cross social and cultural borders and the non-threatening environment it creates which make it an ideal medium for users to engage in spiritual searching. “It provides a seeker with the ability to navigate his or her way to the foot of Calvary’s cross”,²³ he claims. This discourse emphasizes the Internet can serve as a tool both for users interested in pursuing content or activities related to religion and those religious users seeking to promote their beliefs to others through web sites, discussion forums or other ‘e-vangelistic’ activities. The Internet as a tool that can be used in conversion becomes interpreted as being part of a divine mandate, such as in the Christian tradition where believers are charged to “go into all the world and preach the gospel”.²⁴ This discourse draws attention to particular tasks and activities that can be performed online in order to meet traditional religious goals, such as witnessing, preaching, prayer or confession. It argues the Internet can and should be used to promote different aspects of religion.

²¹ See examples in Zaleski 1997.

²² See Wilson 2000, 2, 120, 154.

²³ Wilson 2000, 25.

²⁴ The Great Commission, Matthew 28/18-20.

Technology for Affirming Religious Life

The Internet can also be framed as a technology that can be used to affirm particular beliefs or one's religious lifestyle. This discourse highlights how the Internet is a social technology, helping people of shared faith or convictions to gather together. Attention is given to how the Internet can connect those from the same religious tradition who would normally be separated by geography, time or other limitations. It provides a new image of the global community of the faithful. This discourse also highlights the Internet as a technology that affirms religious life which allows religious communities to emphasize particular religious activities that the Internet facilitates well. This includes encouraging access to religious materials that affirm beliefs, holding religious discussions or debates on issues important to a given community or exhorting members to continue in valued religious activities by providing related resources online. It is a discourse that contextualises the Internet as a technology to be used in life practice that affirms a specific religion or general spiritual ethos.

This discourse is used by Brenda Brasher in *Give Me that Online Religion* as she argues the Internet enables new forms of traditional religious expression, highlighting examples such as a cyber-seder or virtual Passover as a way of helping people reconnect with their Jewish faith. The Internet is a technology that possesses qualities of fluidity and autonomy that she feels can help people understand in new ways concepts of sacred time, religiosity and spiritual experience. Online presents new opportunities that should encourage people to explore religion and other forms of spirituality. Thus the Internet becomes “a crucial contemporary cultural outlet for our meaning heritage from the past” and can “make a unique contribution to global fellowship” and inter-religious understanding.²⁵ Seeing the Internet as a technology that promotes religion allows religious users to cultivate distinct forms of religious practice online. This discourse frames the Internet as a place where religion should be practised, and as a resource for religious people to connect with their faith and other faithful.

These four discourses present a range of explanations religious individual or groups may employ to frame the Internet. The Internet as a spiritual medium frames the Internet as a technology possessing, within the hardware and wires, an unseen realm where humanity can encounter the transcendent and spiritual experience. The Internet as a sacramental space discourse frames the Internet as space that can be shaped to allow people to engage in

²⁵ Brasher 2001, 6.

new or traditional religious rituals online. The Internet as tool for promoting religion frames the Internet as resource able to connect with religious people and activities that can lead them to spiritual transformation. Finally, the Internet as a technology affirming religious life frames the Internet as a resource for building a communal or individual connection with a particular religious tradition or form of life.

Spiritualising the Internet involves accepting and employing a distinct discourse about the nature of the Internet and its relationship to religion or the spiritual in order to justify or promote certain religious uses online. Looking at how the Internet can be cultured in religious language and images also reveals user's distinct views about the nature of the technology. While other discourses could likely be identified these four provide a spectrum of some of the most common evidenced in religious use online. This leads to a discussion of four corresponding narratives of Internet use fostered by these particular discourses. Narratives of religious Internet use provide models for considering how beliefs about Internet technology influence and shape religious use online.

Narratives of Religious Use of the Internet

Within the discourses discussed, distinct ideas emerge about how the Internet should be used and why this use is important. These discourses presented above provide a framework to explain WHY Internet can be used in religious activities. Yet they do not fully explain HOW the Internet is shaped and employed by religious users. Therefore it is important to connect these discourses to narratives of use, showing how the framing of the Internet creates opportunities for religious groups to use the technology in order to fulfil certain goals or support the beliefs of their religious culture.

The Internet as a spiritual medium creates a narrative of the Internet functioning as a 'spiritual network'. The Internet as a sacramental space supports a narrative of the Internet serving as a 'worship space'. The Internet as tool for promoting religion links to the narrative of the Internet as 'missionary tool'. The Internet as a technology for affirming religious life connects to a narrative of the Internet supporting 'religious identity'. These are explained more fully below.

Spiritual Network

The Internet as a spiritual medium discourse describes the Internet as a connection point for users to plug into in their search for spiritual experience. This may take place in a solitary or communal setting. As a medium the Internet can be seen to facilitate spiritual or transcendent encounters, with the God, the divine or other spiritual seekers. This links to a narrative of use of the Internet being a ‘spiritual network’. This narrative is often used to stress that the Internet has been designed by God for a specific religious purpose or infused with the divine with the potential to facilitate spiritual encounters. Here the Internet is used to search out one’s personal spiritual destiny that can be interpreted through a narrative of shared experience. It highlights the desire for freedom and spiritual experience that can be shared with others.

This narrative is clearly seen in one particular case study of a Charismatic email community, the Community of Prophecy, structured as an online school around Christian prophecy.²⁶ It described itself as a “safe-place” to learn how to practice the New Testament gift of prophecy. Members of their community describe the Internet as a spiritual network where “God is weaving connection and creating relationships between people all over the world” for prayer and support. Members felt connections within the online community would lead to opportunities for members to become involved in others’ “real world” lives and ministries. They also stressed connections were designed and initiated by God and were internationally diverse, forming an overlapping network of online and offline communities. Members characterised themselves as “pioneers” on a divine mission and the community having potential to influence the offline world as well as the online setting in this quest. Members were also characterised as involved in “warfare” against an enemy seeking to sabotage the community potential and destiny through computer problems. The spiritual network narrative empowered members to understand their community as possessing power from God to influence the global Christian community. As a spiritual network the Internet is seen as a space where the Divine resides and can be experienced.

²⁶ See Campbell 2005; Campbell 2003a, 179-199.

Worship Space

Another narrative of religious Internet use is as a worship space. This narrative argues the Internet is a sacramental space, a space or forum that can be shaped for conducting traditional or new religious rituals. This can begin with a ritual or act of consecration that is seen to prepare the Internet as a space to conduct a specific religious service or practice. Buddhists, according to Jeff Zaleski²⁷ were the first members of a major world religion to both consecrate the Internet as a sacramental space and to duplicate online and in full a traditional form of religious practice. In 1996 Tibetan monks based in New York performed a special ceremony and ritual to bless cyberspace for use in Buddhist religious practices. Since that time practices such as Dharma Combat, a form of unrehearsed dialogue which tests Zen practitioners in their understanding of Zen truth, has taken place online. Other religious groups have also conducted rituals to consecrate cyberspace as holy space including Catholics and technopagans, a new religion of neo-pagans who perform their rituals online.²⁸

As a worship space the Internet becomes a place for worship. Many religious groups are consciously designing online worship spaces that attempt to re-create traditional religious worship experiences in a digital environment. A common example in the Christian tradition is the cyberchurch, which have been referred to as churches without walls. Examples include the often-cited *First Church of Cyberspace*²⁹ or newer experiments such as the *Church of Fools*.³⁰ The *Church of Fools* was designed as the UK's first web-based 3D church. During this 3-month experiment in 2004 the online congregation was able to attend weekly services in the church's multi-user environment, enabling participation through computer avatars that could join in hymn singing and communicate synchronously with others logged on. Besides the weekly gatherings, the church encouraged online parishioners to drop in and visit the sanctuary or crypt and interact with others. Within its first 24-hours online the church had 41,000 visitors and raised much discussion in the international press about the implication of online church for organised religion.

Online worship spaces can also lead to adapting or modifying religious acts in unique ways. Christian groups have used the Internet to facilitate online prayer meeting. Using

²⁷ See Zaleski 1997, 164.

²⁸ The technopagan movement embraces techno-witches, techno-druids, technoshamans and ravers. It should be noted, that not all pagans are technopagans. For an example of their online rituals see technopagan blessing at <http://www.scaredsacred.org/>.

²⁹ See *First Church of Cyberspace*, from: <http://www.godweb.com>.

³⁰ See *Church of Fools*, from: <http://www.shipoffools.com/church/>.

IRC or chat rooms, individuals gathered for online meetings on various channels designated as religious meeting places and exchange typed prayers with others. Extensive observation of these groups illustrates their innovation in symbolic language used to communicate spiritual content. In a charismatic prayer meeting religious emoticons were frequently used, typed random key strokes such as “josrhsoainvlkdnruojiaurfa” were used to represent glossalia and \o/ used to signify the lifting up of hands to “praise the Lord”.³¹ A study of prayer meetings in a multi-user virtual reality environment found “a prayer meeting in the virtual world may not provide the same type of religious experience as a conventional church service, but it certainly reproduces some of the essential features of the latter - albeit in novel way”.³² The Internet as a worship space narrative encourages the use of the Internet as a space for conducting religious activities and ritual online.

Missionary Tool

Seeing the Internet as a tool for promoting religion and religious practice allows it to easily become a missionary tool. The Internet becomes a dynamic resource for encouraging certain practices among religious followers or seeking to convert spiritual seekers to a particular religious belief or tradition. A growing use of the Internet is online proselytising, often referred to as “e-vangelism”. Various books and online resources have been created to provide guidance in this activity.³³ Online witnessing focuses on presenting a purposeful religious presence in cyberspace through a variety of means, through web sites, in chat rooms and on email lists. While in some cases this is being promoted in a top-down manner, with religious organisations encouraging these activities and providing resources, in many instances these are individual Internet-savvy religious practitioners undertaking these tasks.

A unique example of using the Internet as a missionary tool was the *Online Missionaries Project*. This was a collaborative partnership of three youth-oriented Christian organisations based in the UK in 2002 who sought to develop innovative Internet resources that could be used in missionary activities by Christian groups. The project team consciously described the Internet as a catalyst and tool for mission to non-Christians. Their projects aim was to establish networks of relationships they hoped would create “new

³¹ See Campbell 2005.

³² Schroeder & Noel & Lee 1998.

³³ See Dixon 1999.

shapes of church” by linking “un-churched” clubbers and Christians, both online and offline.³⁴ A focal point of the project was the Clubbers Temple web site designed as a “virtual club” using animated Flash software, sound and experiential elements including a chat room and a prayer wall. Clubbers Temple was built as a connection hub, where spiritual seekers could meet with Christians in the “virtual bar” chat room to find information about Christianity or visit the dance club that was designed to facilitate an “experience with God”. The web site was to serve as a discipleship resource for groups of young people doing face-to-face evangelism on the Spanish island of Ibiza. One team member described it as, “A tool to keep in touch with new friends we have met here in Ibiza and an accessible way for clubbers to find out about God and us”.³⁵ Promoting the site in Ibiza provided a way to initiate “spiritual conversations” or offer prayer to clubbers. Describing the Internet as a tool for mission provided focus to the team members at all stages of the project, from the designers to those serving in the chat room. The Internet as a missionary tool encourages religious users to incorporate the Internet into their proselytising strategies.

Religious Identity

The discourse that describes the Internet as a technology that can affirm religious lifestyle, empowers users to see the Internet as a place to also affirm their religious identity. A common motivation for religious Internet use often is to connect with members of a particular religious background, tradition or theology. Here the Internet serves to affirm or build communal identity and cohesion. Having a shared religious identity means individuals subscribe to common beliefs based on a specific religious tradition lived out through public rituals. Identity comes from reinforcing a particular set of convictions or values that are transported online. Through forming a network of religious identity, users affirm these beliefs through their discussions and common practices. The Internet is also seen as a place that enables individuals to connect with a larger community of shared faith online. Members encourage one another in their shared convictions and support this unifying narrative through supportive discussion on their choice of religious identification. This idea of religious identity is explored in the work of Mia Lövheim where she considers

³⁴ See Campbell 2004a, 208-231.

³⁵ Campbell 2004a, 110.

how religious identity is constructed through discourse with youth discussion boards in Sweden.³⁶ She argues the Internet can play an interesting and important role in youth's process of identity formation, especially related to religious identity. She employs Nancy Ammerman's idea of "autobiographical narratives"³⁷ to uncover the stories that individuals weave and used to describe their particular form of life.

An example of this is the I-church, launched in 2004 as the first official "virtual parish" of the Anglican Church.³⁸ At its embodied dedication in Oxford (July 2004), the Bishop of Dorchester pronounced an official blessing over the cyber-vicar physically present and online congregation present via a web cam: "May it be through I-church, Lord Christ, that many are made one with your and with one another." The 700 members who joined before the official launch agree to live by a modified version of St Benedict's rule of prayer, study and social action. There is a strong sense while though by official sources the online parish is seen as experimental and evolving the project is firmly grounded in the Anglican tradition. Its attachment to St Benedictine is also an attempt to provide a traditional grounding, as the rule emerged as a response to the wandering monks of the Celtic church in Europe. Benedict encouraged stability and attachment and close proximity to one community. This physical connectivity of the monastery is being exchanged within I-church for a more fluid "connectivity through the community of love" and affiliation with the global Anglican Communion. The I-church experiment has raised debates within the Anglican Church on the possible redefinition of the idea of being a sacramental community, a key marker of the Anglican tradition. While what role of sacramental ritual like the Eucharist will play in the I-church are yet to be determined, the attempts to make the community's grounded in traditional forms of expression such as liturgical prayers are meant to affirm the religious identity the community hopes to maintain.

Using the Internet to reinforce or maintain religious identity in the Anglican tradition can also be seen in the online discussion group the Anglican Communion Online.³⁹ This email community identified itself as a microcosm of the larger Anglican Communion in its list web site. A study of this group showed that while members often join the community to gain understanding of the Anglican Church, they stay because of the relationships they form with others who share their allegiance to Anglicanism. The religious identity narrative demonstrates that individuals can see their online involvement as an opportunity to be

³⁶ See Linderman & Lövheim 2003; Lövheim 2004, 59-73.

³⁷ See Ammerman 2003.

³⁸ See website of I-church, from: <http://i-church.org>.

³⁹ Campbell 2005.

interconnected with others from a similar religious tradition. Affirming one's religious lifestyle often means surrounding oneself with like-minded people. The Internet becomes an important resource for many people who see to do this.

These four narratives confirm how religious discourses about the Internet can encourage certain forms of Internet use. The 'spiritual network' narrative describes using the Internet as a spiritual medium to connect with God and a divine destiny. Internet use becomes simply one expression of one's pursuit of a spiritual life or experience. The 'worship space' narrative presents the Internet as a sacramental space that encourages actively designing the online environment in ways so it host religious rituals and facilitate certain expressions of worship or religiosity. The 'mission tool' narrative shows how the Internet can be used to promote religious beliefs to those outside its membership. The 'religious identity' narrative illustrates the Internet can be used as a technology to affirm a particular religious identity or form of life. These narratives connect how religious users speak and use the Internet in ways that allow it to become part of their religious life and community.

Summary: The Religious Shaping of the Internet

This paper has sought to address the need for more theoretical work on religion and the Internet that can interpret and contextualise the common forms of practice occurring online. Considering this process of 'spiritualising the Internet' may offer insight into how religious groups negotiate with postmodernity, by highlighting some of the ways they describe and culture the tools of modernity. Spiritualising the Internet is a process that frames the Internet as an acceptable technology through employing a discourse laden with religious language and meaning. This creates narratives guiding how the Internet can and should be used within the context of a given religious community or beliefs. The fact that the Internet can be cultured to fit within religious practice or overarching beliefs of a given religious tradition affirms users in their desire engage the Internet for religious ends. Technology can be domesticated for not only social, but also religious purposes. Religious users can shape the Internet in line with their values through their descriptive language about the Internet, design technology towards certain religious goals or highlighting particular uses of the Internet that are in line with their life habits. This ability to culture or spiritualise the Internet allows it to be incorporated within the religious self-expression of particular group or individual's life. This investigation of the religious shaping of the Internet provides a

helpful platform to begin to draw conclusions about the relationship of religious Internet users to the emerging digital culture and the role of religion in an information society.

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YOUNG PEOPLE AND THE USE OF THE INTERNET AS TRANSITIONAL SPACE

MIA LÖVHEIM

In her seminal book *Life on the Screen* (1995), Sherry Turkle described how the Internet could be used as a “space for growth”¹. Experiences of presenting oneself online, and of interaction with others through computer-mediated communication (CMC), could provide, she argued, a “transitional space” or “moratorium” for experimenting with new ways of understanding reality, self and others. The particular character of online (or what Turkle termed “virtual”) interaction could provide “safety” for such experiences since it “operates in a time out of normal time and according to its own rules”. Thus, online experiences made possible the development of ways of approaching reality, self and others that were in tune with the post-modern world, since they admitted multiplicity and flexibility, and acknowledged the constructed nature of perceptions and identities in this world.

Turkle’s arguments were, as much contemporary writing, heavily influenced by the utopian apprehensions of the impact of the Internet during the mid 1990s, and based on limited empirical studies. The aim of this paper is to discuss these ideas of the Internet as a transitional space in relation to the experiences of young Swedish men and women using the Internet almost a decade later. My purpose is primarily to outline some of the problems and possibilities of approaching the Internet as a transitional space, through the use of empirical data from a recent Swedish case study.² I will mainly focus on whether, how and for whom the Internet, or more specifically a popular Swedish web community, can fulfil this function for young people in the process of reflecting on religion and religious identity.

The Transitional Space of Youth

In the literature on young people and youth culture, metaphors such as “transitional space”, “moratorium” or “free zone”, have been used in order to describe what it means to be young.³

¹ Turkle 1995, 261-262.

² I am interested in particular in the character and function of an Internet site per se, as potentially fulfilling functions ascribed by Turkle and others to a transitional space. See Grimes 2002, 222, for a discussion on different ways in which media and ritual can be related.

³ See Fornäs & Lindberg & Sernhede 1994; Schultze et al. 1991; Bossius 2003.

Through using these metaphors, researchers seek to address two related aspects of the particular conditions shaping the life of youth in contemporary society. The first concerns how the phase of youth itself can be seen as a separated time in between the innocence and dependence upon others that characterize childhood, and the freedom but also responsibilities of adult life. Since the mid 19th century, young people in western societies have to a large extent been separated or isolated in a world of their own, organized by specific institutions such as school, youth organizations, and more recently the youth or teenage market of specific goods and forms of media. The second aspect of young people's specific life conditions concerns their quest for a space of their own, outside the control of adult society or, increasingly, commercial interests.

The German scholar Thomas Ziehe has described how these two aspects shape young people's lives through the concepts "cultural release" and "cultural expropriation"⁴. Late modern society is characterized by a fundamental erosion of traditional patterns of life, norms and identities. On the one hand this situation opens up possibilities for an unprecedented multiplicity and flexibility, which offers greater freedom to break with previous confinements and traditions, explore alternative forms of relations, and cultivate a plurality of lifestyles and identities. On the other hand, the increasing appropriation of experiences through for example the media, impinge upon young people's ability to experience things by themselves and on their own terms. This erosion of traditional mediators of trust and their replacement by what Anthony Giddens terms the institutionalized reflexivity of late modern society⁵ fundamentally challenges the purpose of the transitional phase of youth in pre-modern societies. Instead of a phase preparing the individual to enter into a new identity, which is relatively clearly defined, by tradition and the local community, the individual is faced with the task of exploring and constructing the self as part of a lifelong reflexive project.⁶ This change may, in addition to new possibilities, also give rise to feelings of insecurity and existential anxiety.⁷ Such feelings can lead to attempts to reconstruct ontological security and traditional boundaries among young people. This indicates that the need for symbolic and ritual expression of important transitions in life is as important for young people today as it was in earlier societies, even though the boundaries defining youth and adult life have become more ambiguous and diffuse.

⁴ See Ziehe 1994; Giddens 1991.

⁵ See Giddens 1991, 19, 144.

⁶ See Giddens 1991, 5, 54.

⁷ See Ziehe 1994, 38; Giddens 1991, 198-200.

Rituals of Transition in Modern Times

Young people's strategies of handling the challenge of making meaning of their lives in late modern society have been the topic of studies in youth culture. Several studies have explored how young people use the street, park, shopping mall or, more recently, different media⁸ in order to carve out a space of their own that can fulfil some of the functions that are implied in Turkle's use of the word "transitional space". The Swedish scholar Johan Fornäs has, for example, described how rock music can fulfil these kinds of functions for young people.⁹ Playing and listening to rock music can be used to claim a space for what he terms "collective autonomy", a space separated from the control of adults in the family and in school, and characterized by a common interest and taste which creates a sense of community among youth. Rock music gives access to alternative values and role models than in the school or in the family, which can also be used to establish differences towards others, and thereby strengthen a sense of identity. Finally, music gives young people opportunities to express their experiences, feelings and identities by themselves, and in different forms than the ones rewarded in school.

Until recently, the place of religion in young people's process of finding possible transitional spaces for handling issues of identity, meaning and belonging has to a great extent been overlooked in the literature on youth culture.¹⁰ A recent study that seeks to address this issue is Lynn Schofield Clark's study of young people's use of popular films and TV series on paranormal phenomena for coming to terms with existential dilemmas and experiences of the transcendent.¹¹ A Swedish example is Thomas Bossius' study of young people using religious symbols in Black metal and Trance music in the process of identity construction. These studies bring out how young people use religion as mediated by popular culture in order to challenge the boundaries of what is considered 'legitimate' religion in adult society, but also to come to terms with the dilemmas and insecurity of late modernity. In this process, young people can use religion in order to experiment with alternative and more flexible understandings of self and society, as well as to reaffirm boundaries and secure stability and coherence in their lives.¹²

⁸ See Skelton & Valentine 1997; Hall & Jefferson 1976.

⁹ See Fornäs 1990, 165.

¹⁰ See Hoover & Clark 1997.

¹¹ See also Flory & Miller 2000; Beaudoin 1998.

¹² See also Tomasi 1999, for a discussion of these issues concerning the interest for alternative religions among European youths.

In use of the metaphor ‘transitional space’ or ‘moratorium’ to explain the situation and practices of young people in modern society, several of the ideas on *rites du passage*, or rituals of transition, described by Victor Turner resound.¹³ This concerns primarily his thoughts on how the functions of such rituals in tribal societies can be observed also in modern societies. These kinds of rituals traditionally fulfil the function of transforming and preparing an individual for entering a new position or identity in the social structure. Subsequent work on new forms of transitional spaces and rituals in modern society, for example through the media¹⁴, has primarily picked up on Turner’s discussions of “liminality” and “communitas”. Liminality as a concept is associated with the margin or liminal phase in a transition ritual, which is set in between the separation, in which the individual through symbolic acts is separated from his or her previous position in society, and the re-aggregation or reincorporation, when the individual takes up a new position.¹⁵ Liminal entities are fundamentally ambiguous, Turner writes, since this condition and the people representing it elude the classifications and positions that make up the social order. They are “betwixt and between the positions assigned and the arrayed law, custom, convention, and ceremonial”¹⁶. In tribal society, this character comes about through emptying the space or symbolic milieu, as well as the persons going through the ritual, of attributes and hierarchies of the past or coming state. Therefore liminal conditions and people are also characterized by being at the margins, and/or in an inferior state.¹⁷ Turner emphasized how the experience of liminality actualizes the fundamental dialectics of social life, between structure and anti-structure, and the necessary balance between the two. The experiences of being in the transitional space bind those who share it together in a specific, egalitarian/undifferentiated form of community, which he termed “communitas” – a sense of community under girding the social order. Thus, people and spaces characterized by liminality open up possibilities to rethink and revitalize the values and order of a society. Turner himself pointed to how liminality in modern society was expressed for example in Millennium movements or the Hippie culture, and to the similarities between ritual and play.¹⁸

¹³ See Turner 1977.

¹⁴ See Goethals 2003; Grimes 2002.

¹⁵ See Turner 1977, 94.

¹⁶ Turner 1977, 95.

¹⁷ See Turner 1977, 125.

¹⁸ See Turner 1977, 96-97, 112; Jones 1997, 120. In this discussion, it is important to remember the – at least analytical – distinction between a liminal or transitional state which ritual brings about, and the characteristics of a transitional space in which ritual acts that can make such experiences possible are being performed. In this paper I am mainly concentrating on the second of these aspects. Discussing the possibility of the Internet as transitional space thus focus more on the conditions making experiences of transformation possible that are located outside of the individual, than factors within the individual.

Young People and the Challenge of Constructing Religious Identity

Religion throughout history has played an important part in the transition from childhood to adult life. Religious symbols, narratives and rituals are used to organize and explain rituals of transition such as rites of initiation of young girls and boys into the community of adults. Religion has also been effective in expressing an individual's new position and identity in society, and guiding him or her in how to act within that position. Following Emile Durkheim, religion can fulfil this function since it relates to "sacred things", and prescribes how society should deal with those.¹⁹ Through religious beliefs and practices, society expresses and reconfirms its fundamental values and orders to itself. Even though this role of religion was probably more distinct and unquestioned in pre-modern societies, where religion was less differentiated from local tradition and ways of life, religious beliefs and symbols still influence rituals of transition and initiation of young people in modern society. In Sweden, the ritual of confirmation taking place in the Lutheran Church of Sweden is an example of this. Until a few years ago it was still practiced by almost 50 percent of the Swedish teenagers.²⁰ Although motifs such as peer pressure, tradition and the receiving of valuable gifts increasingly seem to supersede the explicitly religious motifs, the time of confirmation for many young people still serves as a starting point for reflections on questions of belonging, existential meaning, and identity.

As described earlier, this process is more complicated in late modern society, and so is the role and character of religion. Nancy Ammerman proposes a fruitful approach to the role of religion in identity construction in late modernity.²¹ She starts out from how religion in contemporary society is mediated by many competing "narratives", providing "scripts" that guide individuals in situations of social interaction that invoke experiences of references to something transcendent or sacred. An individual's religious identity is formed in the intersections between his or her experiences of facing issues of meaning and existence throughout life, and these religious narratives. In late modern society, each individual is thus faced with the challenge of forging narratives of self, or "autobiographies" that enable them to handle the ambiguous, contested, multiplex, and transitional character of life and of religion in late modernity.²² In my previous work²³ I have used this approach in order to discuss how young people in contemporary society handle the challenge of constructing 'religious

¹⁹ See Durkheim 1995, 44.

²⁰ See Sjöborg 2001.

²¹ See Ammerman 2003.

²² See Giddens 1991, 5.

²³ See Lövheim 2003, 2004a, 2004b.

autobiographies’, which represents the individual’s continuously constructed understanding of the relation between the self and the sacred or transcendent.²⁴

The Internet as Transitional Space

The Internet can be seen as a new kind of space for social interaction, constructed by networks of computers. Today the Internet is also increasingly being used as a religious space, where people can get access to information, and interact with like minded people or those of different convictions in discussions but also through the enactment of rituals. The issue of whether the Internet can be seen as a transitional space, or a ‘sacred space’, have been discussed by among others Stephen O’Leary, Jan Fernback, Gregor Goethals and Christopher Helland.²⁵

O’Leary’s discussion of the rituals of “Technopagans” starts out from the question of whether rituals in “virtual” environments can fulfil ritual efficacy. He draws on Smith to present this efficacy as a question of asserting difference, of “performing the ways things ought to be in conscious tension with the way things are” and thereby make these things come about.²⁶ He suggests that the rituals performed by technopagans bring about this efficacy, not through physical experience, but through the recreation or claiming of a space in which the sacred is manifested through use of the power of language.²⁷ In this way, technopagans establish a space set apart or differentiated from the world outside and from other online arenas, for the purpose of expressing collective visions of what “things ought to be in conscious tension with the way things are”. Rituals on the Internet are, presumably to a larger degree than those taking place through physical presence, characterized by a fundamental awareness of its own quality, as well as the quality of the sacred it invokes, as constructed, arbitrary, and artificial. Nevertheless, O’Leary claims that these rituals may as good as any ritual fulfil the end of “restructuring and reintegrating the minds and emotions” of its participants.²⁸

Studies of individual experiences of using the Internet as “a space for growth” for the construction of religious identities are less frequent. Helen Berger & Douglas Ezzy in their study of the meaning of participation in Witchcraft-related online communities among young

²⁴ See Lövheim 2004, 42, 65-68

²⁵ See O’Leary 2004; Fernback 2002; Goethals 2003; Helland 2000.

²⁶ Smith 1987, 109, quoted in O’Leary 2004, 51.

²⁷ O’Leary 2004, 54.

²⁸ O’Leary 2004, 56; see also Fernback 2002.

Australian and American Witches concludes that, in line with Turkle's apprehensions, "participation in the Internet may actually be facilitating identity integration under the conditions of late-modernity, in which relationships are increasingly dispersed geographically and temporally and identity is always in the process of transformation".²⁹

Young People, Religion, and the Internet as Transitional Space

These previous studies give several indications of how the Internet can serve as a space for exploring expressions of religious identity, beliefs and practices that help individuals to handle the ambiguous character of existence in late modernity. However, many of these indications are still general and tentative in character. We still need to know more about for example whether some Internet sites might be better suited for such purposes than others, and how different groups of people can take advantage of these possibilities. In the following part of this paper I would like to explore these indications a bit further, in order to bring out some issues that might be relevant to pursue in further research. Here, my primary concern is how the Internet can provide transitional spaces that facilitate the process of constructing what I refer to as religious autobiographies for young people in late modern society.

A first step in studying whether a particular Internet site can serve as a transitional space for young people is to specify what the characteristics and functions of such spaces should be.³⁰ Following Turner, liminality is represented by people and spaces that represent something different than the positions and conventions of ordinary social structures. This gives them the "ambiguous and indeterminate" character, which actualizes the fundamental dialectics of this structure, and carries the potential to rethink but also revitalize the values and hierarchies founding it. Several of these characteristics echo in Turkle's description of a transitional space online. It operates "on its own rules" which are characterized by ambiguity and fluidity. This character is implicitly ascribed to the online setting as being "outside" or *set apart from "normal" time and rules*. This character is implicitly related to the lack of physical contact, which brings about a *destabilizing of cues that signal social attributes and hierarchies*. Through these characteristics, the online transitional space provides a certain "safety" and can fulfil its function as a "space for growth". O'Leary points to how the

²⁹ Berger & Ezzy 2004, 186.

³⁰ This paper is not the place for a thorough review of the overwhelming amount of studies on rituals in anthropology and religious studies. Therefore I will limit my discussion of such elements to the indications given in the studies referred to above. See also Goethals 2003, 257.

construction of a space set apart from other off- and online spaces is carried out through *the power of language*. However, the existence of this specific space, and thereby of its specific character, depends on each participant's explicit acceptance of these conditions and will keep them going.³¹ Therefore, the transitional or sacred space online is also fundamentally *constructed and arbitrary* in character. Nevertheless, these spaces hold the potential of enacting the dialectics between "restructuring and reintegrating" the minds of individuals and of society.

While Turner emphasized the function of liminality to reconstruct a relative stable social order, Turkle and O'Leary focus more on how online arenas characterized by similar characteristics can prepare individuals to approach a social structure which is increasingly ambiguous and arbitrary. Turkle envisions how a transitional space online can help individuals to cope with this situation through breaking with confining social structures and approach reality, self and others as constructed, multiplex and flexible entities. Here, the function of 'restructuring' minds and social positions is emphasized more than the 'reintegrating' function. Her discussion of how the Internet cannot become an alternative life, but rather should be "discarded after reaching greater freedom", to some extent addresses this function. O'Leary also emphasizes the function to envision another kind of order, but he leaves the question open whether disembodied actors and relationships online will reaffirm the social hierarchies of the world offline or depart from them.

Starting from these characteristics of transitional online spaces summarized above, we can formulate some questions for studying to what extent they apply to a particular Internet site. First of all, we need to know more about how the site is constructed as a space set apart from the conditions of 'normal' or everyday, offline life of users. What features of the particular site do fulfil this function? We also need to ask what their implications are regarding whether they facilitate or confine key elements of a transitional space identified by previous studies. How do they affect the suspension of cues signaling social attributes and hierarchies in an offline context? How do they affect the possibility to construct a consensus of rules and values among participants through the "power of language", which O'Leary sees as crucial to define and shape a "sacred" space?

Secondly, we need to look deeper into the implications of the particular character of an online context. Here, we need to study how users of the site experience the ambiguity that is formed by the presumed destabilizing of the 'normal' social structure. As O' Leary points out,

³¹ See Correll 1995.

ambiguity gives opportunities for flexibility but also awareness of the constructed, arbitrary, and artificial character of the space and the meanings produced therein. Previous research shows that young people experience and respond to this kind of ambiguity in different ways. Therefore we need to ask whether the experience of a particular Internet site produces a sense of safety that enhances reflection and perhaps reconstruction of – in this case – understandings of self, other people's choice of religion, and the transcendent reality. Or does it rather feed insecurity?

Internet as Transitional Space: Experiences from a Swedish Case Study

In the following discussion I will use the example of a particular online arena, a Swedish web community that I call simply "the Site"³². This web community is not oriented towards religion *per se*, but supplies discussion groups and chat rooms on a wide variety of topics. During the time of the study, it was visited by a large number³³ of young people from a variety of backgrounds. The empirical material that will be used in the following discussion where collected through online observations of eight discussion groups on religion, four focusing on Christian faith, and four focusing new or alternative forms of religion such as Wicca, Shamanism and Magic.³⁴ Furthermore 15 young men and women in the age of 18-20 where interviewed about their use of the web community during one year. These young people came from a variety of religious backgrounds. Eight of them where more or less active in different Christian denominations, while the other half oriented themselves toward the alternative religions mentioned above. For several of the informants, the year when the study took place was the year when they were about to leave high school, and thereby ending 12 years of compulsory school in Sweden. The experience of leaving high school initiates a process of entering adult life, characterized by responsibilities and freedoms such as taking responsibility for one's own decisions, economically supporting oneself, leaving home, but also finding one's own identity and purpose of life.³⁵ Thus, for the informants, the time of the study intersected with a time in their lives that in several ways was characterized by

³² In order to protect the identities of my informants, I do not reveal the name or URL of this site.

³³ In the year 2000 when the study was carried out, the number of member accounts where approximately 800,000.

³⁴ See Lövheim 2004.

³⁵ Ny Tid – Nya Tankar 1998.

experiences and questions about transition from one stage in the process of constructing identities to another stage.

A Space Set Apart from 'Normal' Life

Starting with the first of the questions outlined above: in what ways the Site was constructed as a space set apart from the informants' everyday, offline situation, especially concerning discussions on religious and existential issues? Here, I will focus on two aspects: its character as a separate place for young people, and its function of providing a separate time for pursuing one's own agenda. Like other web communities, the Site required that users became members in order to fully take advantage of its services. This included access to discussion groups, instant messages, and a personal web page where participants could present themselves in different ways. Members logged in through using a name of their personal choice, and a password. The act of logging on to the Site thus signalled that users were entering a space separated from other spaces offline as well as on the Internet, as pointed out by O'Leary. This experience was also supported by the presentation, the layout, and the history of the web community.³⁶ It was started by a young Swedish man as a "hobby", and when the Site grew he managed it primarily through the help of a few friends. The Site was presented as "a fun place to meet other people online", and the layout was fairly simple, not very elaborated or "flashy". Discussions at the Site were not moderated, and the web master described himself as fairly "broadminded" as to what opinions that could be voiced, with the exception of outright commercial postings, and discriminating or agitating comments against particular groups of people. All of these features contributed to present an image of the Site as a cool, laid back place to hang out, made by young people for young people, away from the eyes and structures of the adult world.³⁷ When asked about why they became members, several of the informants also talked about how "every young person in town uses it" or "a friend/some friends of mine used it".

As a web community, the Site provided access to this meeting place at all hours. The Site as providing a time set apart from everyday duties in young people's lives was evident due to the rising number of log-ins during lunch time and in the evening and night. Many of my

³⁶ This information was obtained through e-mail contacts with the web masters.

³⁷ This character of a subculture for young people is further enhanced by the name, which according to the webmaster was chosen because it "wasn't associated with anything else in particular", and has "a sort of punky-reference".

informants described how they used the Site primarily during break time in school, or late in the evenings when the family computer was free. This use of the Site, in order to get a break from the agenda of school or to “have some fun” after school, was clear also in how several of them primarily associated their use of the Site to their time in high school. Leaving high school for many of them also meant leaving or cut down on their use of the Site.

In these ways, the Site could present a place set apart for discussions of religious and existential issues on terms set by young people rather than by teachers, parents or religious leaders. The informants described how it gave access to other kinds of topics than in the school context, and a wider range of opinions than those voiced in the religious youth groups they attended in their offline community. Furthermore, the Site provided access to discussions on times that suited young people. The function of providing a place and time set apart for these kinds of discussions on religion was, however, also complicated by the particular conditions for interaction of the Site. Its character as a place set apart for young people was – during the latter part of the study – threatened by the growing popularity of the Site.³⁸ When its size had outgrown the time and computer facilities of the original founders, they established contact with a commercial IT company, and announced the launch of a new version of the Site. Several members reacted against this as a threat against the original atmosphere of the Site. As the new version was more elaborated and thus more difficult to access, primarily for those connecting to the Internet through a modem, members started to complain or leave the Site.

The examples outlined above show some ways in which technical aspects such as the interface of an Internet site may facilitate but also complicate its possibility to become a space set apart in time and place for young people to explore the role of religion in their life on their own terms. The final example also highlights that apart from online conditions we need to take into consideration conditions in the offline world when discussing whether the Internet can fulfil this feature of a transitional space. As the example of the Site shows, access to this space required access to a computer and preferably a fast Internet connection which was still quite expensive for an average Swedish family at the time of the study. Furthermore, this access often had to be negotiated with peers wanting to use the school computers, or with family members wanting to use the family computer.

³⁸ In February 2000 the number of unique users was 200,000. In October of the same year the number of registered members was 780,000.

A Space for Destabilizing Social Positions

The second crucial feature of a transitional space described in previous studies is its ability to suspend or destabilize cues signaling social attributes and hierarchies that structure the user's position in offline social structures. When becoming a member of the Site, users were asked to choose a nickname and submit information about their age, gender, and place of living. This information could then be presented in a kind of label or "pick up line" accompanying the name, as well as on the member's personal web page. On this page members could also display images, interests, as well as associations at the Site such as cyber friends and most frequented discussion groups. This information, along with a person's chosen name, thus made up the cues to a member's identity on the Site. The fact that the information was (primarily) given in text rather than through vision, sound or touch, gave members opportunities to circumscribe, change or altogether discard cues of identity used in everyday, offline life. All the informants brought up this possibility when describing their use of the Site. They expected to, through the "anonymous" character of interactions, do things they felt restricted from doing in their everyday lives; for example to be more outspoken, challenge stereotypes, or discuss delicate issues. Thus, their intentions were to try out ways of presenting religious convictions and identities at the Site that in some way differed from their experiences of approaching these issues offline.

An analysis of the patterns of social interaction in the discussion groups did, however, show that rather than allowing a flexibility in the kind of approaches to and relations between religious groups that the informants experienced in the offline context, the textual cues in nicknames, postings, and on personal web pages lead to the use of stereotypes, or polarizations between users of different religious convictions. This primarily happened between users signalling affiliation to a Christian tradition and those who presented themselves as atheists, Satanists or Wiccans. The experience of many of these informants was aptly summarized in a comment made by one of the young Christian girls:

... on the Site it's often like people have a certain image of the church and they sort of stick to it, and also of the one who is a Christian ... it's like, you know, people don't know how things are really and they cannot get to know things better through the Site either.

This ambiguity of textual cues is highlighted by the experience of one of the most active atheists, who was approached as a Christian since he on his web page listed several discussion groups on Christianity and some ironic statements about Christian beliefs! Once positioned as a "naïve and stupid Christian", those users had great difficulties changing this image, and

found themselves trapped in endless, polarized debates. Several of them referred these problems to the way the discussion group was arranged at the Site. Postings allowing no more than 500 signs, lack of moderation, and the steady inflow of new members picking up on the same topics did not provide the means they needed to change the situation.

For users who oriented themselves towards other religious traditions than Christianity, the Site seemed to, in line with Berger and Ezzy's findings described earlier, provide a space where traditional offline, religious authorities could be challenged and new alternatives explored. At the Site Christianity, for several centuries the dominant mediator of religious beliefs and practices in Sweden rather came to hold an inferior position to approaches to religion based on science, or witchcraft, shamanism and Satanism. However, users interested in Wicca, magic and Satanism also had experiences of an unexpected polarization between users. In this case, interactions as mediated through discussion groups seemed to lead to the formation of new divisions between participants, based on cues of 'experience' or 'serious' versus 'unserious' intentions. Such cues consisted of for example references to books, rituals, and years of practice. However, since this kind of experience can be difficult to 'prove' through written text, the criteria of online conduct, preferably treatment of new users was also used to separate more and less 'experienced' and 'serious' users. As explained by the informant "Vera", someone who is "serious" about his or her religion " ... permit everybody else to think whatever they like and then you discuss things, not like ... scold someone, you know".

Another way of destabilizing social position can be to use several different nicknames in interactions. However, as shown by this response to one of the informants who tried out this strategy, a position as 'serious' and thereby trustworthy in the interactions seem to require a certain stability rather than instability of personal identity: " ... thinking of the fact that you don't use one identity but several, how can you be asking something of other people?"

These examples indicate that the ambiguity created by the use of solely textual cues in online interactions not only give users a possibility to destabilize social positions, but may also reaffirm or reconstruct religious stereotypes, divisions and hierarchies in the offline context. The experiences of primarily those who through criticism or scolding were assigned inferior positions in the interactions, like the "stupid" Christians or the "inexperienced" magicians, showed that trying to reverse such positions could be even harder in this supposedly "anonymous" space than in face-to-face interactions.³⁹ Users who dominated the

³⁹ Studies by Kendall 1999, Burkhalter 1999, and Slevin 2000 also suggest that online interactions can reconstruct as well as reaffirm social hierarchies of gender, race and class in the offline world.

interactions were those who were frequently present in the discussion groups, but also were skilful in dismissing other people's arguments and assessing their own opinions through short, written contributions. These users were, predominantly, young men. This illustrates how the potential to circumscribe social positions and hierarchies online also has to be related to the resources and restrictions of different users. Such individual factors might be a user's religious conviction, gender, previous experiences of written discussions, and of using the medium.

A Space for Constructing Religious Autobiographies

The examples above show that in some respects, the Site did improve conditions for approaching religion in ways that served the individual's needs and intentions, as compared to those in the offline context. This was primarily the experience of young people interested in religious traditions that by mainstream society were seen as marginal and obscure. At the Site and other places like it, Wiccans, Satanists or magicians could claim a religious identity of equal significance and legitimacy as Christians. However, discussions at the Site could also lead to critique of convictions and intentions and new dilemmas that a person might not have been exposed to as a solitary practitioner in the offline context. Similar experiences of possibilities and problems were expressed by the Christian informants who at the Site found discussions that offered a flexibility and plurality on crucial issues that was larger than in the local congregation, but at the same time faced new difficulties in trying to "restructure" other people's preconceived ideas about Christian lifestyle and beliefs.

Almost all the informants of the study left the Site within the year that I followed them. This was in part due to changes in their offline lives, but primarily to the fact that the Site could not, in the long time, provide the kind of conditions that they expected and needed in the process of forming religious identities that helped them to deal with the challenges of life. The polarized and fragmented discussions, and difficulties of expressing themselves due to limitations of time and space, made them feel trapped in ascribed identities that they did not see as congruent with their religious autobiographies. For these young people, experiences of interaction at the Site did challenge and 'restructure' their understandings of religion and religious identities, but not in ways that also enabled them to try out new approaches to these issues.

Four of the informants did, however, seem able to use the Site in accordance with expectations outlined in previous research. These informants differed in several ways; two were male and two female, one was a Christian, one a pagan, one an atheist and one a “seeker”. However, they all found ways to handle many of the problems experienced by the other users. Their ability to find these strategies was based on some competences that they possessed more than the other informants. All of them had access to computers of their own, and thereby were able to actively participate in the discussion groups. They were skilful in expressing their beliefs and convictions through written contributions. Furthermore, these users had an approach to religion that fitted the character of the discussions, characterized by reason, distance, critique, wit, and irony. These characteristics seem to give them a sense of trust in their ability to handle the conditions of online interactions. Thereby they were also able to accept and use these interactions to develop further understandings of their own and other people’s religious identities. This is exemplified in the reflections of the informants “Stirner” and “Maria” from their time at the Site:

I’ve also gained more respect for ... the more secular part of Christianity. Svirk and people like him. For people who have reflected on this and, well, for some reason accept god’s existence ... but who accept other people’s opinion about this and do not try to adjust reality in order to fit the Bible. I respect these people so much more, and so I don’t look upon Christians as a homogeneous group in the same way as before.

... I’ve become more humble, perhaps, realized that I really don’t know everything and ... there are like, no evidences either of God’s existence or the opposite. So I think that I’ve come to realize that I don’t know as much as I thought I did before.

These experiences reflect some of the attitudes that Turkle described as “in tune with” the “postmodern world”, such as acceptance of multiplicity, flexibility, and transience of beliefs and identities.

Conclusion

In the early days of Internet research anticipations were expressed concerning the online environment as potentially a modern kind of ‘transitional space’. In this paper I have tried to tease out some key features and functions of such spaces, as described in some of these studies, and to discuss whether they can be applied to the popular Swedish web community “the Site”. The features that I chose to focus on were the characteristics of a site as *set apart from conditions that structure ‘normal’ life* in terms of time, space, and rules of and positions

in social interaction, and its fundamental *ambiguity* and thereby potential to *allow more flexibility or destabilization of social positions*. In terms of the function of these conditions I focused on how these conditions were experienced by young people, primarily whether they produced a sense of ‘safety’ or control and trust, which, I turn, would help them in the process of reflecting on and reconstructing their understandings of religion and religious identities, primarily in terms of openness to multiplicity and flexibility.

The discussion shows that such characteristics to some extent can be found at the Site. It is constructed as a space set apart for and suited to the interests and needs of young people. As described above, this character is however quite fragile and dependent on certain conditions on the part of the users. This finding corresponds to O’Leary’s discussion of the fundamentally arbitrary character of an online ‘sacred space’, with reference to how language constructs and keeps this kind of space going. While O’Leary, like many early studies of online transitional spaces, focused on relatively small, closed groups of Internet users (like technopagans), these kinds of findings bring out the importance of studying also larger, more heterogeneous Internet sites. This is not least important when considering the expansion of the Internet since the mid 1990s, in number of users as well as of interests represented. Findings from online spaces such as the Site point to how differences in experiences, needs and intentions of individuals partaking in a transitional space can become a resource for flexibility and new forms of “communitas”, but also shatter the possibility of the space to fulfil this potential. Indications of how the ‘set apart’ character of the Site becomes threatened by its growth, also shows how the influence of corporate interests looking for lucrative markets among young Internet users can complicate young people’s possibilities to find and maintain such spaces.

My example also points to the need to study how the set apart character of an online space is intrinsically linked to and dependent upon resources in ‘normal’ or offline life. For young people to claim a transitional space, such basic things as access to computers are needed. Even in a wealthy country like Sweden, young people may have a harder time than adults getting access to the resources needed to claim such a space, and negotiating the use of these with family, school and peers.

The examples above also show that interactions at the site did challenge the young informants’ understandings of ‘normal’ cues of social positions and religious authority in society. Thus, experiences of discussing religion at the Site proved to be an ambiguous experience for the young people in the study. However, this ambiguity was of a more complicated character than envisioned in previous research. The experiences of the

informants show how it rather leads to a reaffirmation than a reconstruction of stereotypes about religious identities, and to a construction of boundaries in order to separate authentic or “serious” religious identities from “fake” versions. These findings show that we need a more critical and nuanced discussion of the anticipation that online interaction, due to its differences in cues for presenting and interpreting identity, can become a space for envisioning and perhaps enacting things in ways that challenge conventional understandings of religious beliefs, practices and identities. This ‘ambiguous ambiguity’ also points to the need to bring some other variables into the discussion. In Turkle’s description of the online transitional space, the sense of ‘safety’ is also described as adding to its function as a “space for growth”. The examples above show that ambiguity and flexibility can be a basis for ascribing a sense of safety or trust to an Internet site, but it can also create insecurity, which might lead to attempts to reaffirm more stable, dichotomised understandings of religious identities.⁴⁰

This finding corresponds with previous studies of young people in late modern society, which show that they, on the one hand, seek ways to establish an identity independent of religious institutions and the rules and hierarchies associated with such. On the other hand, young people seek ways to establish coherence and ontological trust in order to handle the complexity and ambiguity they encounter in late modern society, not least in facing different suppliers of religious beliefs and practices. These particular dilemmas of the ‘transitional phase’ of youth might complicate the construction of ‘transitional spaces’ for youth on the Internet. Growing up in a society where institutions and positions representing the “structure-part” of Victor Turner’s societal dialectics are increasingly ambiguous and diffuse – people’s their experience of ambiguity online might lead to a greater need for trust and coherence. These findings echo something, which is noted for example in the studies of O’Leary, Berger and Ezzy. It seems as though an Internet site, in order to function as a transitional space for young people, must include possibilities to ‘restructure’ identities and ideas encountered in life outside the Internet, but also to ‘reintegrate’ the complexities and ambiguities of this life, in a structure of meaning and relevance to the individual. Furthermore, these findings indicate that the experience of *trust* can be a crucial issue to pursue further in discussions of when and how young people can be able to use the transitional space provided by an Internet site as a space for growth. The examples of the four informants who managed to use the Site in this way show clearly that ambiguity and flexibility alone are not enough to generate this trust. As

⁴⁰ See also Linderman & Lövheim 2003.

exemplified above, conditions such as skills in using computers, as well as in expressing oneself through written text, gender conventions, and questions of access to computers also seem to be needed.

This paper has but begun to raise questions about when, how and for whom the Internet can provide transitional spaces that enable individuals and groups in late modern society to make sense of their life conditions. We clearly need more studies in order to develop our understanding of this potential of the Internet further. In order to make such studies, we need to study different kinds of Internet sites, and we also need to specify further what aspects of the online context that can contribute to establish an Internet site as a transitional space.⁴¹ Also, this paper shows that in order to make sense of how the Internet can be used as a transitional space, we need to approach these experiences not only as set apart from ‘normal’ time and rules, but as integrated in the everyday situation of different groups of people. Age, gender, economical situation, and religious belonging are some factors that might affect different individuals’ needs and resources for using the Internet as a “space for growth”.

⁴¹ In these discussions, use of the analytical concept “repertoire of possibilities”, introduced by Slevin (2000, 81f) might be useful. For a further discussion of this possibility, see Lövheim 2004, 60, 77-82.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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RESEARCHING INDIVIDUAL RELIGIOSITY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE INTERNET¹

GERNOT MEIER

The exploration of (new) religious movements on the Internet is creating some tricky problems for Internet researchers. These problems concern to non-reactive and reactive² methods in data-retrieval systems, both in front of and beyond the screen. At the present time (IE 6X / Safari 1.2 / php5 / Flash 7.0.19, and so on), Internet researchers are continuing to design within these limits on both sides of the screen and they offer interesting and satisfactory results³. Nicola Döring demonstrates modern Internet research methods and a detailed analysis of new forms of design engineering. In this context, data mining⁴ and knowledge information obtained from databases are important, but copy research is still one of the most powerful tools:

Text analysis as a research and analysis procedure takes on a particular significance in online research since computer generated communication can be documented automatically and completely (word for word) and researchers can access the corresponding texts easily. Log file analysis, which is based on an automatic logging and evaluation of man-machine interaction (for example, calling up pages from the WWW), also becomes more important. Only relatively few net-specific *data evaluation methods* really exist, such as online mapping [...].⁵

In this context, Google-related methods can hopefully be of assistance.⁶ But there are some areas where collecting data is not the only problem. You can find processes of synchronization between Web sites in the way varied individual religiosity is displayed on the Internet, as well as the assimilation and incorporation of global events and some catalytic converter feedback effects on Web sites and movements.

¹ Sincere thanks are given to S. Trahasch, Research Assistant at the chair Algorithms & Datastructures at the University of Freiburg i. B. (<http://ad.informatik.uni-freiburg.de/~trahasch/>).

² See Bortz & Döring 2002, 325-326.

³ See Hu & Meng 2005, 491-498.

⁴ See Bortz & Döring 2002, 385-385.

⁵ Döring 2003, 243. Translation done by Carol Grugeon. "Der Textanalyse als Erhebungs- und Auswertungsverfahren kommt in der Online Forschung besondere Bedeutung zu, da computervermittelte Kommunikation automatisch und vollständig (wortwörtlich) dokumentierbar ist und entsprechende Texte für die Forschung leicht zugänglich sind. Daneben gewinnt die *Log-File-Analyse* an Bedeutung, die auf einer automatisierten Protokollierung und Auswertung von Mensch-Maschine-Interaktion basiert (z.B. Abruf von Seiten aus dem WWW). Tatsächlich existieren auch nur relativ wenige netzspezifische *Datenauswertungsmethoden*, wie etwa die Online-Kartographie [...]." To the recent field of research called „Internetkartographie“ (Internet cartography / Web cartography / Internet mapping) see Heinze 2004, 41-43.

⁶ See websites of TheBrain at <http://www.thebrain.com> and of TouchGraph LLC at <http://www.touchgraph.com/>.

It is difficult to deal with these problems and develop some sort of semantic dens network.⁷ Dynamic Web sites that are based in the Web and Deep Web RDF(S)⁸ increase this problem. In this case, the dynamic Web sites are one of the major problems. Way back in 2001, Patrick Rössler and Werner Wirth highlighted both the vital importance and the problems associated with dynamic Web sites:

In theory, there is a question as to whether the database behind Web presentations can still be understood as media provision. Because there is no longer a provision without concrete user interaction it is perhaps more accurate to speak about provision options. Whether these ever come to fruition, depends on whether at least one inquiry is made. In terms of pure communication the constructs of provision and use both come together here. It is probably not possible to achieve an all-encompassing solution to the dilemma but rather, in the future, we will have to define and conceptualize the provision idea for individual projects much more specifically than we have up to now⁹

It is now necessary to establish research methods that go beyond simple data collection and exploration. I would like to deal with these issues based on the Web sites of the “Freie Interessengemeinschaft für Grenz- und Geisteswissenschaften“(Free Community of Interests in Fringe and Spiritual Sciences and Ufological Studies) and the so-called “Ashtar Command” or rather “Ashtar-Command-Movement”.¹⁰

Both movements are part of special groups¹¹ that claim direct contact with extraterrestrials, where aliens play different roles. Some of the groups imagine that the aliens are instrumentally involved in the creation of mankind and the universe or that they are continuing to work toward this. Many of these groups interpret the aliens as messengers or signs of a new time. In some cases these messengers are characterized as demons or bringers of salvation. Others hope for a new creation of mankind in which aliens are significantly involved.¹² This progression or degression of mankind is possible as a transit, reproductive cloning or as a new world in which a new mankind takes place. In this field you often find the concept of the ‘Homo Novus’ – a term coined by A. Grünshloß¹³ – that describes a person

⁷ See Bernes-Lee 2004; Berendt & Hoto 2003, 1 – 22.

⁸ See Berend & Hotho 2003, 4.

⁹ Rössler & Wirth 2001, 283-284. Translation done by Carol Grugeon. “Theoretisch erhebt sich die Frage, ob hinter den Webpräsentationen stehenden Datenbanken überhaupt noch als mediales Angebot verstanden werden sollen. Da ein Angebot ohne konkrete Nutzerinteraktion überhaupt nicht mehr zustande kommt, sollte man vielleicht besser von Angebotsoptionen sprechen. Ob diese jemals realisiert werden, hängt davon ab, ob wenigstens eine einmalige Nachfrage gestellt wird. Kommunikationswissenschaftlich gesehen fallen hier die beiden Konstrukte Angebot und Nutzung zusammen. Eine prinzipielle Lösung des Dilemmas ist wohl nicht erreichbar; vielmehr wird man künftig projektspezifisch den Angebotsbegriff genauer als bisher definieren und konzeptionell berücksichtigen müssen.”

¹⁰ See Schmid 1998, 2001.

¹¹ Wharf 1997.

¹² Grünshloß 2000.

¹³ Grünshloß 2000, 14-18.

with new paranormal skills. Many of these groups have a „similar“ message: Aliens and people on earth have the same roots but differ in their evolution. Particular events on earth – such as the first nuclear explosion – caused aliens to want to get in contact with us to help us with the ascension.

Aliens, ascension, nuclear explosions, evolutionary scenarios, and many other factors build the Web background of groups and movements like the Ashtar Command and the FIGU Community.

The FIGU Community

The founder of the FIGU Community is Eduart Meier, known as Billy Meier¹⁴. He claims to communicate at regular intervals with aliens; they contacted him indirectly in his childhood and youth and later in a direct way. He has been travelling in different star ships over the past few years and has had individual courses of instruction from the aliens. He has therefore attained special powers and achieved extrasensory perception of his environment.

Billy Meier tells us, that the end is coming and that he is the last real and truthful prophet of this world, before the third burning of the world (*3. Weltenbrand*¹⁵) occurs. The only way to get out of this apocalypse is strict obedience of his instructions. These instructions impact every aspect of the community and the community itself is an example of the real way of life that exists on other planets. Some members of the community live in meat space near Zürich, Switzerland.

The FIGU Community's distribution of information, ideas and word-of-mouth advertising was very limited in its initial years. Literature was often typewritten and separately tacked. It had a potential world-wide distribution area through the postal service but this was often limited in reality to northern Switzerland and southern Germany. Billy Meier's publications are written in German and contain the special words and syntax of a specific local dialect.¹⁶ He claims that a code of evolution is integrated in his writings.¹⁷

Through the Internet and its potential, distribution channels have changed dramatically – and that goes for Billy Meier. The Web site contains links to different continents, including Japan. Whether people exist behind these links or not is a moot point, but it is more

¹⁴ See website of FIGU at http://www.figu.org/de/figu/billy_meier/billy_meier.htm, retrieved on: 08/25/05.

¹⁵ See Meier 2004.

¹⁶ See website of FIGU at <http://www.figu.org/de/figu/index.htm>, retrieved on: 03/26/05.

¹⁷ See Meier 1978.

interesting to consider the possibilities of digital data processing.¹⁸ These processes refer back to the affairs and normative statements of the community itself. Previous ways of legitimating were orientated on Billy Meier's original text and his written statements. Billy's normative statements could be legitimized on the basis of his forecasts for the near and distant future. According to Billy Meier's account, these forecasts are possible through "alien technology" and "mental alien education".

It is possible to observe a change after the Web sites appeared: the way the Internet and other Web sites with connections to extraterrestrials are structured cause an effect that radically changes the presentation methods. The first Web sites looked like advanced texts. But now pictures, sounds and videos¹⁹ form the basic elements. This multimedia information is a major attraction for users and is now reflected by the community. Hans Georg Lanzendorfer, a member of this community, characterizes this process as changing the audience it attracts:

Just a few years ago, visitors used to come to the center in Hinterschmidrüti on Sundays to ask questions, discuss issues and express their opinions. Hinterschmidrüti is quite isolated so then, as now, people only really took the trouble to come to the center if they were really interested in tackling the issues. That went for critics and supporters – and unfortunately also for group members, etc.

The Internet has fundamentally changed this. Internet visitors have become more impersonal. They hide themselves behind anonymity, IP numbers, synonyms, facelessness and lack of commitment. For many people it has become much easier to voice loud and prejudiced criticism in a covert, nameless and anonymous manner.

The Internet is all about consumption. It offers a glut of information that no one basically needs. It also opens the door to many surfers on topics that they have barely considered before. It often seems to me that «Billy» Meier (BEAM) and his contacts to the "*plejarischen Föderation*" have become nothing more than a sensation for many surfing the Internet. It often just seems to a case of satisfying a sensationalist need that lasts a few mouse clicks. The Internet statistics from our Homepage show that clearly. It is mostly the UFO pictures that are viewed and downloaded. The spiritual teaching or background information is of little if any interest.²⁰

¹⁸ See website of FIGU at <http://www.figu.org/de/figu/index.htm>, access: 26.03.05.

¹⁹ See website of FIGU at <http://www.figu.org/de/ufologie/index.htm>, dated on 01/2004, retrieved on 03/21/05.

²⁰ See Lanzendorfer 2003. Translation done by Carol Grugeon. „Noch vor wenigen Jahren kamen die Besucher am Sonntag ins Center nach Hinterschmidrüti, um ihre Fragen zu stellen, vor Ort zu diskutieren und ihre Meinung zu äußern. Hinterschmidrüti liegt ziemlich abgelegen und daher bemühten oder bemühen sich in der Regel auch nur Menschen ins Center, die sich in irgendeiner Form wirklich mit der Sache befassten und auseinandersetzten – so auch Kritiker/-innen wie auch Befürworter/-innen, und leider auch Sektenangehörige usw. Dies hat sich durch das Internet grundlegend geändert. Die Besucherinnen und Besucher im Internet sind unpersönlicher geworden. Sie verbergen sich hinter Anonymität, IP-Nummern, Synonymen, Gesichtslosigkeit und Unverbindlichkeit. Für viele ist es im Verborgenen, im Namenlosen und Unerkannten sehr viel einfacher geworden, lauthals und voreingenommen zu kritisieren. Das Internet ist Konsum, bietet eine Überfülle von Informationen, die im Grunde genommen niemand braucht. Es öffnet vielen ‚Surferinnen‘ und ‚Surfern‘ auch Tür und Tor zu Themen, worüber sie sich früher kaum Gedanken machten. ‚Billy‘ Meier (BEAM) und seine Kontakte zur plejarischen Föderation – so scheint es mir oft – ist für viele im Internet lediglich zur reinen ‚Surfsensation‘ geworden. Vielfach geht es scheinbar einfach nur darum, für die Dauer einiger Mausclicks die eigene Sensationsgier zu befriedigen. Die Internet-Statistik unserer Homepage zeigt es deutlich. Es werden vor

This statement shows the interdependency between the community and nearly medial-autonomous Web sites. Intrasystem we can also see some sort of criticism at the Internet.

In researching new religious movements on the Internet the FIGU-Community is a good example for a community in the Internet with a good contour, hierarchical web presentation and excellent possibilities for offline and online research. Inside a Google-related detached representation of the key structure of the Web sites, we can establish that this community is active within the World Wide Web – in all probability initiated by its users – as a rather singular community. But in the case of Billy Meier it is possible to see also three evident problems:

1. There is no official Internet database from previous Websites – it is not possible to compare previous information and websites.²¹
2. The copyright information on the website prohibits specifically any use of information – also the use of text or the html-code.
3. This means that some types of scientific traceability are not possible.

These problems are major constraints to general Internet research²² – but there are some data sources that are specific to one special group. In addition to these problems, the way movements like the Ashtar Command are presented on the Internet pose another host of difficulties.

The Ashtar Command Movement

The Ashtar Command believe in extrasensory perception but here is not restricted to one person – it is available to the whole world. This is one of the most important differences between the FIGU Community and the Ashtar Command Movement. Some Ashtar Command members believe that the earth will gradually develop. In the course of time, when many people have joined the “movement of light workers”, the earth will take a jump to the next level.²³

The Ashtar Command Movement itself cannot be qualified in conventional ways by an important book or a founder. There have been some attempts try to specify the Ashtar

allem die UFO-Bilder angeschaut und heruntergeladen. Die Geisteslehre oder die Hintergrundinformationen interessieren kaum bis wenig.“

²¹ The services of <http://www.archive.org> give only rudimentarily hints and is good but a single rereader.

²² See Beck 2003.

²³ See <http://www.ashtar.de/> it is not possible to verify exactly the author, in all likelihood: Ammon, E.-M. (see <http://www.sananda-net.de/impressum.htm>), retrieved on 03/16/05.

Command Movement in this “old way”.²⁴ But finally the dynamics of this movement and the Internet overtakes them.

Back in the early days of the Internet it was very easy to analyze Web site meta tags to see in which religious sphere the designer wanted the Web site to be found.²⁵ But the system has developed.²⁶ On the technical side, the construction of Ashtar Command web pages can be seen as a map of links, keywords and iconography. Hyperlinks and keywords provide an integrative net structure and function as lighthouses on the Internet ocean, offering guidance through the stormy seas of its roads and frameworks. Not only have search strategies and search machines changed: presentation methods have also developed. We can now see ongoing dynamic synchronization processes between the individually designed Web sites of the Ashtar Command Movement. These Web sites absorb and assimilate some structural characteristics – such as pictures, icons or links – in an active way. Some Web sites put them in new contexts, only for them to be snatched from there into even more up-to-date settings. The Ashtar Command Web sites produce processes of synchronization and assimilation. They also promote some sort of cohesion between very different Web sites. In this context – and as a result of the Web page design – pictures, iconography and keywords are extremely important.

The iconography on the Ashtar Command Movement Web sites²⁷ is directed toward active integration with other groups with aliens and UFOs. However, it is not just the iconography that provides typology. Some dynamic structure characteristics appear in many Web pages and these are reflected in the source code. In many web pages and their reflection in the source code some dynamic structure characteristics appear. A few elements appear more regularly²⁸ and these elements are often displayed in Web sites that are partly inside an authority system.²⁹

The websites integrate information on George Van Tassel, Kenneth Arnold, Orfeo M. Angelucci³⁰ or other “founders”,³¹ of the UFO-Contactee Movement, usually using both

²⁴ See Grünschloß 2000; Schmid 2001. Grünschloß supports a great mirror of some Ashtar Command Websites from 1997!

²⁵ See Reiser 2005; Nickol 2003.

²⁶ See Hochreutner 2005.

²⁷ A colourful web page with the topic in the headline (Ashtar Command Movement and Star Trek) is: <http://www.starchild.de/Medien/Kiener/211096k1.htm>. See Whittington 1997.

²⁸ See Rösseler & Wirth 2001, 291-293.

²⁹ On the discussion and the comparison of the term “authority system” compare such as: Collins 2004.

³⁰ See Angelucci 1983.

³¹ See Schaefer 2000, 549.

iconography³², texts³³ and links. To be a contactee³⁴ and to undertake channeling usually involves two elements:

1. Information from the aliens, the Ascendent Masters or other beings from outer space. This information is not only available for some special group but is in the public domain.
2. Channeling is a genetic term that appears in many individual religious Web sites. Channeling within the Ashtar Command sometimes includes special details (such as the form of address, name of the alien, sequence of the channeling, and end sequence). These characteristics, however, seem to be constitutive for the process of legitimization:

Integration and uptake in other Web sites only seems possible with this special structure. Some Web sites stress the importance of being a member of an “**outside team**” sometimes known as the light workers³⁵ – this occurs mostly when the members recognize themselves as an incarnated extraterrestrial or an Ascended Master. These Web sites mostly reject forms of **abduction**. They contend that the world will **develop**³⁶ and will reach an **ascension**.³⁷ The reception of the concept of progression seems to be an additional clue to the important connection between the Web site and the development of the Ashtar Command Movement.

By observing numerous Web sites, it becomes clear that a large number of people are influencing this development. As far as I can see, there is no data on single individuals who try to monopolize this central function of the community. These terms (outside team, ascension, etc.) stand in direct coherence with some pictures inside the Web sites.³⁸

However, the whole community is largely created by the common use of these structural elements. It seems possible that these structural characteristics really create a web community with a special group dynamic that follows completely new rules. Until now, such world-wide establishment of special structures was only said to be possible over very long time periods. But the structures of these new religious movements, especially on the basis of the fast-growing Internet, change rapidly today. I consider the Ashtar Command Movement a preliminary model for religious movements and their communication on the Internet.

But this example highlights some special problems in addition to those considered in connection with the FIGU Community: The Ashtar Command Movement has a fluid structure

³² See Tuella 1985.

³³ Many web pages pick these topics up e.g.: Hähnelt 2004.

³⁴ See *Die Meisterlehren* at website of the *Golden Light Fleet* at <http://www.goldenlightfleet.com/wordpress/index.php?p=84&page=1>.

³⁵ See Star 2003.

³⁶ See website of *Die Sananda-Connection* at <http://www.andreana.de/Sananda-Con1.htm>.

³⁷ See forum *Dreams of Light* at <http://www.dream-of-lights.de/modules.php?op=modload&name=eBoard&file=viewthread&tid=2619>, retrieved on 03/26/05.

³⁸ See for instance http://www.bethedream.net/AshtarCommand/you_might_ask.htm, http://www.luisprada.com/Protected/the_ashtar_command.htm, <http://users.sdccu.net/alahoy/ashtar.jpg>, <http://lumieresdelaudela.com/images/portraits/ashtar1.jpg>.

that is now evident on the Internet. Internet research let us assume that most religious communities and movements are fluid even if they are not only Internet based. It is not possible to draw exact borders or to collect data in a “normal way” and it is completely unexplored in which ways aforementioned authority systems are working. The fluctuation and sometimes the very short duration of Web sites often makes it impossible to gain little more than a temporary screenshot.

Furthermore, it is not possible to get any information from the author or the people in the background, because dynamic Web sites have “no” designer – only digital data processing. If we start with the diagnostic findings, the Ashtar Command Movement Web sites do not grab “all” forms, icons or information from the Web background of the UFO Cluster. For example, there is barely any mutual reception between the Ashtar Command Movement and the so-called “Raelians”.³⁹ That means that the researcher has a starting point. The afore-mentioned elements can be seen as **integrative characteristics**. It is now possible to describe and analyze new religious movements, like the Ashtar Command Movement, using the criteria of the integrative characteristics of the structure elements. With this first step it is possible to get a starting point to categorize the Web sites and their religious movements and even to analyse the detailed contexts. Separate aspects within these movements, like forecasting the future or the function of rituals, can be analyzed without neglecting the whole context of the movement and without having to refer to an insecure base of data.⁴⁰

In exploring the Web sites from the Ashtar Command Movement it is not unusual to encounter new multicollinearity elements but it is necessary to reduce data and redundancy to narrow the data down.

In addition to these problems, there are dynamic Web sites with sources in the (deep) deep web that make it possible for a particular Web site to be built only once as a result of the user and researcher interaction. Similarly this databases and sources like “crafted” Web sites use typical elements in a dynamic way and build them up. An impression of this dynamic and the use of typical elements can be shown with the above-named Google-related computer programs.

The numerous connections between the Web sites are not just part of the dynamic of absorbing data, icons and typology; other dynamic typologies are at play here. One example is the link structure, which is significant for the communication and the “**texture**” of the Ashtar

³⁹ See website of the Raelian Movement, <http://www.rael.org/>.

⁴⁰ But on the methodical side these configuration elements give only hints – it is not possible to say: Ok, I have classified “x” configuration elements – and if a website reaches 80% of them – then this website belongs now and ever to the Ashtar Command Movement. This is not possible, because the websites are in dynamic process and generate time and again new important topics.

Command Movement. As an amplification of the integrative characteristics towards a more open system the term “liquid threads” characterises the ongoing processes in the Ashtar Command Movement.⁴¹ Most of the web pages build “liquid threads” inside the movement and these are executed on the Internet. From my point of view, the term “liquid threads” has the advantage of describing the fusion of the structural identity of Web sites and a dynamic “typology”.⁴² This term can be a bridge to integrate the multicollinearity and the dynamic of Web sites.

Next Generations

Internet researchers are confronted with the problem that new technology sometimes calls for new research methods. Within the Internet it is necessary to reflect the methods in the space of the new communication and computer technology. Information and data retrieval⁴³ of authors and users (including automated systems) depend on “models of representation”. Modification and use create a development of these (religious) systems in addition to feedback converter effects. The next generation of methods to manage this confusion will be the spinning of semantic nets⁴⁴ over the word wired web. The ISO standard 13250 is a further step toward managing data:

The present day full-text search can provoke unbridled rage or deep resignation in expectant users, depending on their temperament. The first tool in eliminating this problem is undoubtedly XML, whose job it is to structure documents and confer particular significance to particular sections using individual and freely definable element names. The real problem, however, lies a lot deeper. XML is also not suitable for queries like "bring me all the biographies of artists who were friendly with Johann Sebastian Bach". The ISO standard 13250 on topic maps adopted in late fall 1999 could

⁴¹ The important article from Daniela Ahrens and her remarks on the term *relationales Raumverständnis* (relational understanding of space) and the Internet: “Contrary to the differentiation between virtual and real, a relational understanding of space emphasizes the relevance of the network without linking the network idea to technology alone. As a result, it is no longer possible to determine in advance whether the local port is the place from which abstract, distant space is understood and interpreted, or whether the Internet “discovers” the local port. This is only decided in relationing. Online and offline, here and there, lose their explicit anchoring in space and appear as independent marked areas. Outside is not thought of as the undetermined but as the outside through which the inside that one creates is generated. Creating references and links and defining and protecting specific space and perspectives requires a large amount of (communication) work. In contrast to the modern container space, space is no longer thought of as a basic requirement but as a construction that is closely interwoven with every type of interaction and communication.” Translation done by Carol Gruegon. Ahrens 2004, 175.

⁴² The term **liquid threads** enables as well the researchfield of the blogshere in a new way. Möller 2005, 115-158.

⁴³ See some new ways e.g. Byun & Choi & Lee 2005, 218-227.

⁴⁴ See concerning the Dynamic Semantic Web Kaehr 2004.

provide a solution to this. The idea is not to change existing Web sites and documents but rather to create an external view of these documents – the topic maps. A topic can be anything – every thing, every topic, every person, every word. And yet documents have to provide information on topics [...] The standard also provides the option of integrating a network of associations. "Toccatina was composed by Bach" would be an example of this. The option to search for associations like this and their characteristics and the navigation within these knowledge structures provides Internet users who are weary of full-text searches with a new tool: the intelligent search machine.⁴⁵

The next technical generation in the world wired web is likely to be the Semantic Web – and this will change everything again, not only on the technical side. . It will only be a short time until it is necessary for Internet researchers to generate intelligent search agents as one of their research tools. These tools will be necessary within the Internet to “characterise” movements like the Ashtar Command and they will need to be designed in a way that is not static and pre-determined. In this case, liquid threads can be an important building block for instance to show interdependencies between Blogs and Websites⁴⁶. The way these tools are designed and used must be reflected by a new range of duties. Analytical investigation and technical design will be closely related in the next generation of research into individual religiosity.

The major problem related to these methods and the semantic web is a problem we have already outlined, namely scientific traceability. For traceability, online publications with access to the explored databases is essential. Until then, it is not quite clear how these new methods displace “ancient” methods like quantitative and qualitative analysis, but in my view they will refer to each other to produce great new designs.

⁴⁵ Widhalm & Mück 2002, 2. Translation done by Carol Grugeon. “Die Volltext-Suche der Gegenwart mag erwartungsvolle Benutzer je nach Naturell in unbeherrschbare Wutanfälle oder tiefste Resignation treiben. Ein erstes Werkzeug zur Behebung dieser Problematik ist unzweifelhaft XML, dessen Aufgabe ist es, Dokumente zu strukturieren und einzelnen Abschnitten durch eigene, frei definierbare Elementnamen besondere Bedeutung zu verleihen. Das eigentliche Problem liegt jedoch wesentlich tiefer. Für Abfragen der Art „bringe mit alle Biographien von Künstlern, die mit Johann Sebastian Bach befreundet waren“ ist auch XML nicht geeignet. Der im Spätherbst 1999 verabschiedete ISO-Standard 13250 über Topic Maps könnte dazu eine Lösung anbieten. Die Idee dahinter ist, dass bestehende Web-Seiten und Dokumente nicht verändert werden, es wird vielmehr eine externe Sicht auf diese Dokumente, die Topic Maps, erstellt. Ein Topic kann an sich alles sein, jeder Gegenstand, jedes Thema, jede Person, jedes Wort. Dokumente haben dabei die Aufgabe, Informationen über Topics bereitzustellen. [...] Der Standard bietet auch die Möglichkeit, die Topics in einem Netz von Assoziationen einzubinden. ‘Toccatina wurde komponiert von Bach’ wäre ein Beispiel dafür. Durch die mögliche Suche nach solchen Assoziationen und ihren Eigenschaften und die Navigation innerhalb dieser Wissensstrukturen entsteht für volltextsuchgeschädigte Internet-Nutzer ein neues Instrument: die intelligenten Suchmaschine.”

⁴⁶ Karger & Quan 2005, 214 – 228.

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DISCOVERING THE INVISIBLE INTERNET

METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF SEARCHING RELIGION ON THE INTERNET¹

OLIVER KRÜGER

In his well-known work, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Anthony Giddens speaks of the disembedding of social interaction from temporal and spatial conditions as a distinguishing feature of modernity. With the beginning of the modern era, he says, social space becomes increasingly independent of concrete places. Social interaction involves partners who do not share the same geographical space and whose communication is realized over spatial distances.² In discussing the transfer of rituals online, we seem to be confronted theoretically and empirically with the disembedding of ritual interaction from its traditional temporal and spatial conditions.

The acquisition of "ritual competence" and its normative implications is usually attached to the experience of the socially structured life-world (*Lebenswelt*).³ Thus, ritual competence is a result of a learning process within a social community that requires regular participation in rituals and the gradual mastery of specific ritual knowledge. This knowledge is normally controlled by an institutionalized hierarchy. Here, the constitutive acts of communication gain their validity and traditionalizing power through an inter-subjective consensus, which already includes the participants' reflected reference to the life-world; and the acquisition of ritual competence implies the adoption of a collective system of values and beliefs.⁴ The relevance of the recent transfer of ritual knowledge and elements of ritual performances into the context of the new Internet medium becomes clear if we consider the ritual theory of the Durkheimian School.⁵ For Durkheim, the common experience of rituals was not only the basis of a religious community but also the foundation of society.⁶

¹ I would like to thank Heidi Campbell and Gernot Meier for their helpful contributions.

² See Giddens 1992, 17-29. I discuss the ambivalence of Giddens's metaphor of the disembedding of religious communities on the Internet in Krüger 2004.

³ See Goffman 1967; Schütz & Luckmann, 1979:154-172, 293-313.

⁴ See Habermas 1981, 182-228.

⁵ See Dawson 2004, 75-76.

⁶ See Durkheim 1925, 593-648.

This then begs the question: What is the role and significance of the Internet in imparting ritual knowledge? How do the communicative structures of the Internet change the transmission of ritual knowledge and ritual competence? Are Internet users in fact freed from all traditional barriers such as age, gender, education, and other similar personal qualifications, so that they now have equal access to ritual knowledge and the same opportunity to acquire ritual competence. And what are the communicative and social structures that are developed by online discussion forums and by individual homepages? How can Internet users construct norms to determine what is wrong and what is right in the context of complex ritual performances? Is the Internet a fully democratic or even anarchic medium in the field of religion – one that realizes an ideal of total equality and liberty, as Howard Rheingold claimed more than 10 years ago?⁷ Can these processes of acquiring ritual online knowledge now be regarded as socially disembodied?

Broad theoretical concepts such as liberty or disembodiment may not help greatly in acknowledging the social changes of religion in times of religion going online. There are too many ideal implications behind these great concepts – some of these refer to Michael Heim's metaphysics of cyberspace.⁸ When Christopher Helland asserts that "doctrines and teachings that were once centralized and controlled can now be openly challenged, contradicted, or ignored through a medium that is accessed by hundreds of millions of people every day,"⁹ we have to ask what "openly" means in this context. The idea of overcoming social structures and hierarchies to realize the true equality of individuals is still a persuasive virtual utopia that stems from a long tradition of technical innovations bound to the idea of liberty (such as canals, trains, telegrams, radio, and so on).¹⁰ These utopian ideas strongly reflect an emic religious perspective, as the pagan book author Lisa McSherry demonstrates: " ... anyone anywhere – without fear of discrimination or harassment by small minded neighbors ... can worship with others in Cyberspace."¹¹

A metaphor like disembodiment may illustrate some hypothetical tendencies in Internet theory and also some methodological problems of empirical Internet research. With this in mind, I would like to discuss some empirical problems connected with exclusive online research after presenting some provisional results of a study of online discussion forums in the Wicca, witches, and neo-pagan esoteric fields. First, however, I propose to apply the

⁷ See Rheingold 1993.

⁸ See Heim 1993.

⁹ Helland 2004, 30.

¹⁰ See Stegbauer 2001, 38-66; Connolly 2001.

¹¹ Cover of McSherry 2002.

sociology of knowledge as a methodological starting point for the empirical analysis of the religious Internet.

Sociology of Knowledge

Thus, before I explore ritual discourse on the Internet, I would like to return for a moment to more general theoretical considerations. I am convinced that the study of religion and rituals on the Internet will benefit greatly if we follow the old advice of Max Scheler, Peter L. Berger, and Thomas Luckmann and consider the sociology of knowledge as the theoretical and methodological starting point of any sociology of religion:¹²

The task of the sociology of knowledge is the analysis of the social forms of knowledge, of the process by which individuals acquire this knowledge and, finally, of the institutional organization and social distribution of knowledge... The consequence for the sociology of religion as a discipline is clear: the sociology of religion is an integral and even central part of the sociology of knowledge. Its most important task is to analyze the cognitive and normative apparatus by which a socially constituted universe (that is, 'knowledge' about it) is legitimated.¹³

When Karl Mannheim created the idea of sociology of knowledge in the 1920s, his perspective focused mainly on different social classes and the conditions of their social and ideological knowledge of the world (*Weltanschauung*).¹⁴ The sociology of knowledge tries to understand the epistemology of individuals and social classes – what do people believe about how the world is? And how do people gain this knowledge? It is obvious that we can apply this question to the matter of religious world views and ritual knowledge and competence as well. In fact, the ideas of religion and the experience of rituals are most important elements of sense-establishing systems.¹⁵ The great advantage of the methodological approach of the sociology of knowledge is its double reflexivity: we not only consider the conditions of knowledge of our human objects of investigation but also the conditions of our own knowledge. The recent discussions in cultural studies with regard to orientalism have demonstrated that findings within the humanities and social sciences do not dispose of a privileged point of view but depend on specific social and cultural conditions.¹⁶ Describing and analyzing new forms and conditions of religious communication may suffer from our

¹² See Scheler 1963, 33-35; Berger & Luckmann 1969, 69-73.

¹³ Berger & Luckmann 1969, 69.

¹⁴ See Mannheim 1970.

¹⁵ Berger & Luckmann 1994, 77, 98-138.

habitual patterns of recognizing religion, such as focusing on religious ideas or the classification of established religious groups.¹⁷ The reflection of our own scientific, cultural, or even theological epistemology is at the center of the empirical approach led by the sociology of knowledge. This is the theoretical background to the methodological considerations that follow.

Wiccan Rituals on the Internet

In July 2002, a group of four sociologists, theologians, and religious historians (including the author) started a three-year research project on the topic of rituals on the Internet at Heidelberg University. While Kerstin Radde is analyzing the personal homepages of religious individuals, I am focusing on discussion forums.¹⁸ It is not accidental that we chose the Wicca movement as the subject of investigation, since the traditional Wicca movements (like the Gardnerian or Alexandrian Wicca) are structured by a very rigid order of precedence that is based on gradual initiation and instructions on ritual knowledge, and even exclusions from higher rituals. Further, "... among contemporary neo-pagan and Wiccan groups, ritual is central to both religious worship and creative expression"¹⁹. Consequently, the transfer of ritual knowledge on the Internet makes this competence in Wicca rituals available even to those who were not previously initiated into the movement: "Knowledge becomes separated from a community within a particular time and place, and for teens there is no need to learn from their 'elders'; they are able to create their own form of Witchcraft or Paganism."²⁰ From the very beginning, a larger proportion of the members of Wicca have been known as eclectic practitioners; they are not part of any specific Wiccan craft and are often not part of a coven. Instead, these practitioners draw upon several sources to form their own individualized and innovative religious practices.²¹ The examples of self-confident teenagers and women offering neo-pagan ritual and spiritual knowledge in the media point to the emergence of highly individualized witches. On the comprehensive homepage of the U.S. individual Wicca

¹⁶ See Maasen 1999, 45-50 .

¹⁷ Kieserling 2004, 152-169.

¹⁸ See her forthcoming article in *Online 1/2 (2005)*. We are a part of a newly established Collaborative Research Centre on the *Dynamics of Rituals* with 16 associated projects. See <http://www.ritualdynamik.uni-hd.de/en/index.htm>.

¹⁹ Magliocco 1996, 93.

²⁰ Berger & Ezzy 2004, 177.

²¹ See Cunningham 1988, 2002; Lewis 1996, 86-87.

practitioner, Isamara, Cyber Wicca is even presented as a new branch among the numerous traditions of Wicca. Isamara defines Cyber Wicca as follows:

Cyber Wicca is less of a tradition, than in the traditional sense of the craft. The Internet is the ultra-modern age of Wicca, and more and more people are turning to it in their quest to practice The Old Religion. It is the ideal medium for the solitary or eclectic practitioner, to learn from and communicate with others in the craft. It is also ideal for those people unable to meet with and practice with others, and indeed for those who for various reasons, need to remain anonymous. There are now many groups on the Internet that take part in live play and group rituals. This is accomplished through synchronized live imagery and the typed word. When you think about it, magic holds no boundaries; a person practicing in England using the same tools, method, and intent, synchronized with a person in America, should and now do, work together in common goals.²²

That the acquisition of ritual competence loses much of its social integration through use of the Internet is also apparent in the striking example of the ritual of self-initiation that was invented by the Wicca practitioner David Sands in 1997, and which can now be found on many Wiccan Web sites.²³ Thus, initiation refers only to a new state of spiritual identity and not to a social community of witches. The study of some Wiccan practitioner homepages seems to indicate that this religion is now highly individualized. The ritual knowledge for initiation, now available to everyone on the Internet, does not seem to be controlled by a social hierarchy.

However, while we have observed a great individualization of the Wiccan religion and practice through the use of the Internet, there are also new forms of community with regard to the Wiccan religion. In this case, the so-called ritual communities are not constituted by the collective performance of rituals, but by communication on rituals, which generally leads to a more differentiated depiction of the recent developments in the Wiccan religion and its periphery. Here, the recent works of Helen Berger and Douglas Ezzy on developments in contemporary neo-paganism and witchcraft in the U.S. and Australia indicate a more complex situation that contradicts the wide-spread assumption of a general individualization and simplification of religion. The Internet is used to get in touch with other witches, to exchange experiences, and even to become an 'instant expert' with significance for other members of the group. Thereby, the participation in online communities provides young witches with an important sense of belonging to a group of people who share similar beliefs and practices. A

²² See *Moonlight Magick* from <http://wiccachile.tripod.com/moon/others.htm>.

²³ See for example website of *Wicca for All People* at <http://www.angelfire.com/super/wiccaforallpeople/selfinitiation.html>.

number of Berger's and Ezzy's interviewees also reported to have found real life contacts.²⁴ Although Wiccan hierarchy tends to be increasingly in the minority, particularly among young people, Berger argues that we can observe a high homogeneity of conviction and ritual practice among witches.²⁵ In comparison with the 1960s and 1970s – when neo-pagan thought was largely restricted to scattered solitary practitioners or covens – books, workshops, magazines, television, and the Internet strongly support the standardization of ritual practice today: "The Internet and attendance at festivals have led to an increasing similarity among adherents in their ritual practices, interpretations, and magical acts."²⁶

I would like to use my own project on the online ritual discourse in the field of Wicca and witches to illustrate some methodological problems in our Internet research. In 2003 there were no less than five larger, German discussion forums explicitly in the field of Wicca, witches, and neo-pagan esoteric, with more than 200 registered users and more than 30 contributions per day.²⁷ In addition to these explicit religious discussion forums, there were also some special sections on witches in the common discussion forums of women's and youth online magazines such as *Bravo* and *Brigitte*.²⁸ In spring 2003, I began to analyze a sample of 22 discussions on rituals using a methodical combination of communication analysis, qualitative contents analysis, and group discussions.

The provisional results of this analysis indicate ambivalent structures in the online ritual discourse. On the one hand, we can clearly recognize that there is no monolithic religious institution that controls ritual knowledge – every religious individual can express his or her thoughts and ideas, and many people actually do. On the other hand, however, we can see that the online discourse establishes rules of communication and certain rules of the concrete forum's community. While some discussions on rituals are quite tolerant and appreciative of the creativity of others in designing rituals, most discussions are normative: different opinions on how to perform a ritual correctly lead to controversial disputes.

Bearing Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson in mind, communication always includes aspects of content and social relation.²⁹ So, beside rhetoric and substantive strategies – such as personally devaluing other users or referring to 'classic' Wiccan authors – the presentation of discursive agency plays an enormous role in these discussions. New hierarchies of ritual

²⁴ Berger & Ezzy 2004, 186.

²⁵ Berger & Ezzy 2004, 175-178.

²⁶ Berger 1999, 126. Berger traces two processes that are characterized by normative isomorphism (this is professionalisation of the Wiccan community) and mimetic isomorphism (this depends on the uncertainty of Wiccan practitioners). See Berger 1999, 123-130.

²⁷ See for example <http://www.hexen-online.org>.

²⁸ See for example the *Magie und Mystery Board* at <http://www.bravo.de>.

²⁹ See Watzlawick & Beavin & Jackson 1967, 51-54.

competence emerge, with the social status of all registered users represented by a symbolic graduation system that takes account of the number of articles they have written. On the popular Hexen-Online forum, your rank is reflected by symbols of plastic, silver or golden cauldrons.³⁰ The individual user is automatically integrated into a system of religious and social status that structures the online community in a manner that reflects the way members of real Wicca covens are part of a complex graduation system. The significance and the weighting of statements in those discussions depend on the visible social status of the communication partners. Nicknames, pictures, and the special status of the moderator or webmaster are further aspects of social relations.

In summary, we have to see that ritual knowledge is not totally disembodied in the online ritual discourse. Where old structures disappear, new structures and hierarchies emerge in discussion forums in the process of acquiring ritual competence. There is no single authority controlling the ritual discourse, but each discussion forum has a complex hierarchy of authority and discursive agency.³¹ However, these provisional results from the contents analysis of discussion forum communication are limited. To know more about the religious people behind them, we have to better understand the structures of online communication processes.

The Invisible Aspects of Religion Online

In this regard, however, we are confronted with some empirical difficulties, which my classical empirical field study hinted at. In 2003 and 2004, I conducted eleven qualitative interviews among twelve users of witchcraft, Wicca, and neo-pagan esoteric discussion forums. I became aware of many of the empirical problems of previous exclusive online research during my field work. Acknowledging the limits to our conclusions on postmodern religion and religious people derived purely from online research may help us to improve our current research methods.

³⁰ See <http://www.hexenboard.de/hexenboard/index.php>.

³¹ Furthermore, in recent years we have been able to observe a strong tendency on German language Web sites to institutionalize these learning processes of ritual knowledge. It is not accidental that the structure of witches' schools resembles examples from popular media. Indeed the schools of witches vary from *Harry Potter's* interactive *Hogwarts Online* (<http://hogwartsonline.de/unterricht.html>), *manga-witch-schools* (<http://www.magical-hexenschule.de.tt/>), to explicit commercialized schools (<http://www.8ung.at/foundation/hs/hexenschule.html> or).

Technical Selection Effects of Searching Religion

The basic parameters of any empirical research are the validity and reliability of the material that has been collected by the researcher. The reliability is dependent on trustworthy research methods. Will our methods lead to the same results if we repeat our study? Or do our results depend to a large extent on unclear factors, such as the difference between male and female interviewers or certain selection effects? The validity reflects the relation between theoretical concepts and our empirical observations. Do we see what we are supposed to see?³²

In systematically considering the importance of both the validity and reliability criteria in our Internet related research, by far the most important aspect appears to be the problem of selection effects. This problem refers to a simple and naive question: what *do* we see? While this question is a fundamental problem in ethnographic and sociological research, it is even more severe with regard to Internet research. Computer mediated communication (CMC) on the Internet constitutes hyper reality – thus, we do not have direct access to the social and personal reality of our empirical field. In addition to social and cultural selection effects that depend on, for example, our gender or our own religious convictions, the hyper reality of the Internet is only accessible through some technical filters that we, as researchers, cannot control. Therefore, we have to become aware of what we *can* see.

Leaving the initial site of our Internet Explorer or Netscape Navigator requires a selection. In most cases, talking about religion on the Internet means to talk about religion on the World Wide Web but we have to acknowledge the fact that there are other highly interesting aspects of the Internet for searching religion. The Usenet, for example, includes more than 100,000 newsgroups with about two million articles emerging every day.³³ This alternative "community" is proud to differ in behavior and style from the ordinary World Wide Web.³⁴

Another basic difficulty is connected with the so called deep Web. The deep Web covers parts of the Internet that are not registered by the robot programs of search engines because of access denials by the providers or technical restrictions. Most parts of the deep Web are probably data collections that dynamically form Web sites after a concrete request by a user (as in Web shops). The deep Web is supposed to contain up to 500 times as much information

³² See Friedrichs 1990, 100-103; Knoblauch 2003, 162-168.

³³ See <http://www.usenet.com/index.htm>.

³⁴ Smith 2001.

as the surface web. Recently, some smaller search engines such as Completeplanet.com and Turbo10.com have tried to fill this gap by expensive technical means.³⁵

If we do not rely on empirically problematic pre-selections (link collections, newspaper articles, and so on), we depend on the results of search engines. And let's be pragmatic: we depend on the first pages of results from search engines and we have to recognize that ordinary search engines, such as Google or Altavista, capture only 30–40 % of the surface web. Using search engines for Web catalogues that include substantive commentaries by Web editors produces a small number and low topicality of results: the Open Directory Project, for example, 'only' includes about four million Web sites.³⁶ Thus, we depend on the page ranking technology that was first introduced by Google in 1999: about 25 different criteria determine the rank at which a search result is placed. The most important aspects are the number of external links and the term vector (distribution and appearance of the requested term on a site). Metatags and keywords now play a minor role since they supported the manipulation of search engines by implanting masses of popular terms on Web sites.³⁷ But different search engines use different ranking preferences and in some cases they even depend on lucrative contracts between search engine providers and the owners of Web sites.

A small experiment illustrates the differences of ordinary search engines: searching for the term "religion" on Google places the Religion-Online.org Web site first in some 18 million research results. This site offers dozens of links to addresses on the Web, mostly Christian related, and is provided by Rev. William F. Fore, president of the World Association for Christian Communication. Asking for "religion" on Altavista puts the same site in sixth place and Yahoo even ranks it 12th.³⁸

The substantial validity and quality of research engines is at least questionable and in many cases unsatisfying.³⁹ Of course, we will always find "something" – but neither do we know why we found a certain Web site nor what else is "out there". Finding Web sites by using the external links on a previous Web site may cause the problem of cohort effects: Web sites that refer to each other are supposed to be similar, while others might be excluded.

So what can we do to improve reliability in the first steps of our online research – in the selection of the empirical material? First, it is necessary to explore the way data is collected in the research report – the more transparent this process description is, the easier it is to trace

³⁵ Griesbaum & Bekavac 2004, 40-49.

³⁶ Griesbaum & Bekavac 2004, 37-39.

³⁷ See @-WEB <http://www.at-web.de/google/g-deutsch.htm#ra>.

³⁸ Enquiry done on 01/20/2005. See website of *religion-online.org* at <http://www.religion-online.org>. Information on Fore can be found at: <http://www.religion-online.org/forebio.htm>.

³⁹ Griesbaum & Bekavac 2004, 45-49.

undesirable selection effects. Second, as long as we do not dispose of our own search agents, the combination of different ordinary search engines (such as Google), special search engines (for example, for searching the deep Web), offline literature, and tips given by religious informants might increase the reliability of our research instruments and decrease the selection effects caused by dependence on one single search instrument.

Social and Cultural Selection Effects of Religion Searches

While the aspects of technical selection effects mainly refer to the reliability of our data, there are some more difficulties related to the problem of validity: do we really find what we are looking for? In dealing with religious expressions of individuals or non-institutionalized "movements" on the Internet, our habitual categories of "membership" are inappropriate and misleading. In recent years, the problem of Western conceptions of religion and membership of religions raised an ongoing discussion in cultural studies on applying analytic patterns derived from institutionalized (Christian) churches to other cultural hemispheres or new forms of religion.⁴⁰ Notwithstanding the fact that the Internet offers the opportunity to trace "invisible religion", the epistemological difficulty caused by our searching devices on the Internet is even more severe than in ordinary empirical research. Feeding the search engine with a defined search term such as "Wicca" or "witch" means that we – as researchers – define a certain religious system. The selection effects caused by our search terms are quite significant – consider, for example, that many witches today do not regard themselves to be a part of the Wiccan movement. But adopting an emic perspective on the question of what defines a certain religion will inevitably lure us into even deeper dilemmas: in many cases of non-institutionalized religions, we can observe a vigorous struggle for the right definition of a particular religion – a definition that includes some and excludes other believers.⁴¹

What can we do? We just have to try to avoid selecting our material by religious belief systems. Instead, we can try to analyze what people are doing in CMC, regardless of their beliefs. In my own research project, for example, I selected a wide range of discussion forums that dealt with rituals in the field of witches, neo-paganism or magic (the topic of the research project). In seeking people there who were interested in being interviewed, I did not ask for

⁴⁰ Instrumental for these academic discourses have been Luckmann's *Invisible Religion* (1967) and Said's *Orientalism* (1978).

”witches” or Wiccan believers, but for people who were talking about rituals on these forums. As a result, half of my interviewees did not consider themselves witches but druids, (neo-) pagans, and curious beginners. Searching for a ”witch” would have required a definition of what a witch is and would have excluded many of those who communicate on witch rituals. Thus, I could learn much about communication, patchwork ideas, and individual practice, but not about a specific religious belief system. This method might also avoid the dominating focus on religious ideas and dogmas – typical in philological religious studies – in favor of a stronger consideration of religious practice and rituals.

Invisible Aspects of Communication and Online Community

Another fundamental problem with online research is our limited view of CMC processes on the Internet. We are only able to recognize a small part of the different aspects of online communication.

The first problem is that we do not *see* every act of communication in the discussion forums. We never see what ”guests” (inactive persons who are not registered as a member of a certain online community) are doing there. From some forums that offer online statistics on members and guests, we know that there are actually large proportions of guests who presumably just read the contributions on the forum.

From my own experience of forums and my later interviews, I now know that I also underestimated the discursive power of the moderator and the webmaster, since some acts of communication are simply not visible for later analysis. Moderators shift discussions from one section to another, not only blocking discussions so that they cannot be continued, but also deleting complete discussions. One of my interview partners reported that there had been a vibrant discussion on angels on a witches’ discussion forum and that after a few days the webmaster interfered and deleted the entire topic because the supposedly ”Christian” theme of angels did not fit his neo-pagan interpretation of witches. So, if you want to stay a member of a certain Web community – maybe because you appreciate its extensive online facilities or its special atmosphere – you have to adapt.

This point leads directly to the aspect of social relations in online communication. We can only gain a limited understanding of social structures in online communication by analyzing

⁴¹ Of course, these struggles can be seen as the first steps toward institutionalization. See, for example, the recent debate on the ”bastardization” of the Wiccan movement as part of the ”Keep Wicca Traditional Ribbon

the textual and symbolic contents of homepages or discussion forums: some virtual communities, such as discussion forums or multi-user dungeons (MUDs), are proud of their exclusive culture. The lack of face-to-face communication means newcomers and leaders both acquire and use symbols (such as the cauldrons) that reflect their power and status. Textual and technical means can be used to struggle for power in the online community.⁴² New social structures and hierarchies emerge: "MUD users experience a redefinition of social inhibitions; they do not experience the annihilation of them."⁴³ Rather than a general assumption of equalization, we can discover the emergence of new hierarchies, behavior rules, and different social roles for insiders, newbies and "wannabe witches", for example.⁴⁴ However, Lorne Dawson argues: "We need to know more about the qualitative character of online relationships and the actual performance of so-called virtual communities."⁴⁵ With regard to the social relation aspect of online communication, there is a "virtual blackout cloaking interaction"⁴⁶ caused by our complete lack of knowledge of the social context of religious Internet users from pure online research. We can hardly acknowledge the significance of the religious online world for single users (are they single users?) since we do not know whether online community participants also interact offline with each other. Are they single individual practitioners or active members of an offline religious community? Immanent content analysis of discussion forums and Web sites only provides a diffuse picture of *why* people get involved in Internet communication. In my later interviews, I recognized that religious communication and the acquisition of ritual knowledge only reflect part of the participant's personal motivation for joining a discussion forum. All my interview partners stated that they were interested to meet other witches to establish a regular get-together or to perform rituals together – at least at the great feasts of the year. Some already did so and were active coven members. For several of my interview partners, these social aspects were clearly more important than religion: "People use the Internet in ways that are in continuity with or augment their offline social lives."⁴⁷

Further, in line with the Durkheimian paradigm, the Wiccan book author, webmaster, and practitioner Lisa McSherry opposes all those interpretations of online religious practices as a mere indication of individualization with regard to her own online coven: "Doing ritual, no

Campaign" on the Internet: <http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/Square/7290/>.

⁴² See McSherry 2002, 76-80.

⁴³ Reid 2001, 112. Also see Reid 2001, 111-120.

⁴⁴ See Paccagnella 1997, 5; Lövheim 2004b, 68-71; Stegbauer 2000, 29-34

⁴⁵ Dawson 2004, 78.

⁴⁶ See Smith 2001.

⁴⁷ Dawson 2004, 79. Also see Dawson 2004, 77-81.

matter how small or simple, is a powerful way to build community. Each time you work together magically with other coven members, you add to the group mind and the dynamics of the coven's structure."⁴⁸

The Context of Internet Usage

The Internet is no insular medium: it is a medium in the context of other media. To state the significance of religion on the Internet means to know how many people use the Internet for religious purposes, what they are doing there, and what significance the Internet has for them in comparison with other media. Do users only join one religious discussion forum? Do they use a number of other Internet communication facilities (chats/MUDs)? Do they prefer to visit representative homepages or discussion forums? What can we say about the fluctuation of users? And what significance does the Internet have in comparison with books, television, magazines, and – of course – personal religious experiences?

The first steps to analyze this have been undertaken by the Pew Internet and the American Life Project.⁴⁹ Their study from 2001 (with data collection until September 10, 2001) showed that 25% of U.S. Internet users have benefited from the Internet for spiritual or religious purposes on at least one occasion. Most treated the Net as "vast ecclesiastical library", and the most active online religion surfers (several times a week for spiritual purposes) also participate most actively offline in their faiths (strong believers, often praying, attending religious services).⁵⁰ The second study from 2004 highlighted that as many as 64% of U.S. Internet users "have done things that relate to religious or spiritual matters" at least one time. However, their sensational representative results also include "religious matters" such as sending an online greeting card at Christmas, reading news accounts about religious events and affairs, or sending/receiving/forwarding e-mails with spiritual content.⁵¹ In contrast to the Pew Project, a recent German representative study of personal homepages indicates that religious content and religious individual presentations have no statistical significance on German homepages.⁵²

⁴⁸ McSherry 2002, 75.

⁴⁹ See <http://www.pewInternet.org/index.asp>.

⁵⁰ Larsen 2001, 6-22.

⁵¹ Hoover & Schofield Clark & Rainee 2004, 4-5. Including aspects like Christmas cards and *receiving* e-mails makes the validity of the Pew project results partly questionable.

⁵² See Misoch, 2004, 155-165.

However, Stewart Hoover, one of the leading authors of the Pew Project, also proposes a qualitative approach toward the use of different modes of engagement with the media. In a study among 62 families, his research team analyzed their experiences in the media (the understanding and interpretation of media texts and objects), interaction about the media (social relation for solidarity, resistance, and so on), and accounts of the media (on media use in their cultural and social context).⁵³ A specialization on the religious topic is still needed.

In the context of the Wiccan and neo-pagan tradition, we can dispose of some isolated findings on the religious use of media. The empirical field of what we term "Wicca" has changed completely within the last 10 years: Even at the very beginning, Gerald B. Gardner (1884-1964) and Alexander Sanders (1916-1988) – who are considered the founding fathers of all modern traditions of the Wiccan movement – published books and appeared on television talk shows in the 1950s and 1960s, although other Wiccan practitioners rejected them for this, viewing it as a violation of their vows to secrecy. Nowadays, however, the theme of magic and witchcraft has become really popular, especially in the U.S. and European media. Internationally broadcast U.S. television series like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Charmed*, and *Sabrina* only reflect the diffusion of neo-pagan knowledge and magical practice in popular media.⁵⁴ However, we have to take into account that there are totally different reception patterns here, as Lynn Schofield Clark showed in her excellent study on the reception of "supernatural" phenomena on electronic media. She identified five types of teenage media users: their attitudes towards alternative religion and spiritual issues presented in popular media range from admiration to rejection, with imitation and skepticism in between.⁵⁵

Besides electronic media, books and magazines still have an enormous significance in spreading alternative religious ideas. Authors like Silver Ravenwolf, Starhawk, or the popular German witch, Thea, create a mixture of neo-pagan esoteric practices (from healing stones to astrology), a simplified version of Dianic Wicca, and some propositions for rituals and patterns for individual ritual design in their books and articles, and on their Web sites.⁵⁶ All of my interview partners owned at least a few popular or specialized books on witches and Wicca. Considering the fact that 25% of U.S. teens watch more than *five* hours of television a

⁵³ See Hoover 2003, 13-15.

⁵⁴ See Schofield Clark 2003, 47-74. The influence of *Harry Potter*, *Sabrina*, and *Charmed* on the homepage of the witch, Skalay, illustrates the significance of popular media events for (post-)modern witches (see [http://www.skalay.de/Frame: Was ist eine Hexe?](http://www.skalay.de/Frame:Was_ist_eine_Hexe?), retrieved on 25.01.2005). For studies on *Buffy*, *The Vampire Slayer* see *Slayage. International Journal of Buffy Studies* (See <http://www.slayage.tv/>).

⁵⁵ See Schofield Clark 2003, 95-180.

⁵⁶ Thea had a column in *Astrowoche*, an esoteric German magazine, in which she offers new rituals every week; Starhawk and Ravenwolf are famous for their books (Ravenwolf 2003; Starhawk 1978; Thea 2000).

day, and only 5% of the same age group spend more than *one* hour per day on the Internet, Lynn Schofield Clark cautions against overestimating the religious significance of the Internet for youths.⁵⁷ Yet, in their study among young pagans, Helen Berger and Douglas Ezzy convincingly conclude that the Internet plays a relevant role for religious minorities in the context of other media: "However, the Internet is part of a larger process by which teenage Witches explore and participate in Witchcraft."⁵⁹

We are not able to answer these important questions about personal media preferences and the individual significance of the religious Internet without asking the users directly. What we can do, is to take the special media history of a religion or religious movement into account in order to better understand the role of the Internet for those people. In the early 1990s, for example, neo-pagan and esoteric platforms were constituted on the Internet in the same way that many other special interest groups use Internet newsgroups, newsletters, and discussion forums. This new medium continued the well-proven communication facilities of the 1970s electronically. The widely scattered members of the different Wiccan covens had exchanged their ideas on rituals and on social items in simple (real mail) newsletters since then.

But here again, a historical treatment of media in certain religious (or non- religious) communities must circumspectly avoid ideal implications. Presenting a history of modern media – in order to analyze the relation between media and religion – Lynn Schofield Clark introduces the paradigm of "protestantization" that symbolizes "culturally dominant values – a set that includes individualism, freedom, pluralism, tolerance, democracy, and intellectual inquiry – has its roots in the Protestant Reformation and its challenges to the authority of religious institutions."⁶⁰ In doing so, she introduces not only a paradigm of description but also implies the reception of every new media, such as the Internet, closely bound to the ideals of Protestant values and the American culture. This empirical approach might be quite problematic.

Identity

We could consider using technological methods and statistics to gain some better information on user preferences. But who are the users? Even if we could get information on single IP-

⁵⁷ See Schofield Clark 2003, 14-17

⁵⁹ Berger & Ezzy 2004, 176.

⁶⁰ Schofield Clark, 2002, 7. Also see *ibid.* 7-14.

addresses – we do not usually have this knowledge – we would find out more about the computers than the human beings – and they could even be located in a public library or university. Identifying single users by nicknames appears to be difficult, too – nicknames replace anonymity (“anonymity” = “no name”) but they only represent the ideal self or, in the worst cases, a faked avatar identity.⁶¹ We never know who it is. But we know from Internet research that faking your personal identity or improving your profile in a discussion forum, for example, is very popular, and even required to a degree. The large quantity of people or contacts available on the Internet requires the presentation of a somewhat unique and attractive character – for some users, the Internet becomes a multi-optional space for trying ludic identities.⁶² Gender swapping, making yourself younger, “pushing up” your religious biography, and using attractive photographs can almost be regarded as normal. To be attractive as a communication partner, your personal presentation has to be attractive. Especially on private homepages, users tend to gain social acceptance by constructing an ongoing personal presentation on this “bounded region”.⁶³

In the course of my interviews, I heard of a male user in the German discussion forum Hexen-Online.org who used about 15 different nicknames/characters in this forum. This user created a great number of artificial discussions among his own virtual personalities in the forum – he asked questions and answered them by himself. When his game was revealed, most users thought that he was suffering from a mental disorder. But I believe that his behavior as a multiple personality user (MPU) is in line with the rationality of online identity in discussion forums – he could artificially show, by his faked social relations, that he was popular and that people talked to him. He could also produce multiple contributions without arousing suspicion in order to receive a higher symbolic grade in the online community. Of course, this example is extreme, but it demonstrates the general problems of identifying religious individuals on the Internet.

The Medium

In my view, these difficulties of empirical Internet research show that it is a fundamental necessity to consider the very special conditions of communication on the Internet. Many

⁶¹ See Gallery 2000, 71-75.

⁶² See Vogelsang 2000, 246-250. Although the construction of identity at first glance seems to be independent of the off-line look, gender, age, and race, O’Leary recently contends that the physical (artificial) construction of online identity and its attraction depends in many cases on bodily features. See O’Leary 2004, 56-57.

Internet theoretists have pointed out that the Internet has lost the hierarchical structure of the book market, so that individuals can now publish their individual religious ideas. This is true and there is no doubt that this is a great opportunity for our research in the study of (invisible) religion. But we should not forget that the Internet medium itself involves some new special conditions of communication. As the Toronto School of Communication – following Harold A. Innis, Marshall McLuhan, and Joshua Meyrowitz – has emphasized, the effects or conditions of the medium are stronger than the concrete contents of communication.

The sociology of knowledge asks for exactly these social conditions in the acquisition of knowledge and of communication. One of the Internet's most important general conditions is that information (personal homepages as much as nicknames, and so on) have to create attraction due to the enormous demand for selection.⁶⁴ Without considering these special media conditions we cannot discuss whether personal religious statements reflect real religious confessions or experiences or whether they adopt strategies of attraction by "upgrading" their religious biography or offering popular religious information. Especially when homepages or contributions in discussion forums combine their religious presentation with commercial interests, we have to take these communicational conditions into account as a kind of advertising. A homepage that offers ritual knowledge of Wicca along with items of Santeria (voodoo religion) and presents them in syncretism as the essence of a witch's wisdom clearly cannot be regarded as ideal proof of religious creativity in the ritual discourse. Some of the patchwork phenomena on the Internet that we can observe may refer to the special conditions of the Internet medium rather than religious ideas. A homepage that offers Santeria *and* Wiccan rituals at the same time might be attractive to more users.⁶⁵

Conclusion

Although Internet research offers many important opportunities for our research, we have to realize the limits of immanent Internet analysis. We have to take the socio-cultural and technical selection effects into account and explore them. And, having found online material, there are acts of communication that we simply cannot see. We cannot say much about why users join a discussion forum or why they create a personal religious homepage. We actually have no idea of the media preferences of certain users and of the significance of the Internet in

⁶³ See Dawson 2000, 32-36; Misoch 2004, 133-137

⁶⁴ See Wirth & Schweiger 1999.

comparison with other media. Furthermore, we have to become aware that every appearance on the Internet reflects the special conditions of the medium: certain strategies of gaining attraction (partly due to commercial interests) may dominate the presentation of religious ideas.

Last but not least, we have to consider the problem of fake or avatar identities – especially the extreme form of multiple personality users. While pure online research is fast and cheap, there are severe difficulties in empirical online research, especially concerning the question of identity:⁶⁶

But what is the real meaning of socio-demographic data obtained through, say, a structured on-line questionnaire? What is really happening, for example, when SweetBabe, a regular participant in IRC channel #netsex and one of the hypothetical cases from our survey sample, tells us that her real name is Mary, she's thirty years old and she works as a secretary? ... Even when the design of research does expect some data referring to the *real world*, it is never correct to accept this data without keeping in mind that obtaining information about someone's off-line life through on-line means of communication – although seemingly easy and convenient – is always a hazardous, uncertain procedure, not simply because of the risk of being deliberately deceived but also because in such cases the medium itself increases the lack of *ethnographic context* ...⁶⁷

Some researchers, including Heidi Campbell, Andreas Ackermann, and Stephen O'Leary, claim to consolidate these different approaches towards (religious) identity on the Internet – O'Leary's research considers how people put their ritual knowledge into practice, what significance rituals have for them, and how they even participate in online rituals.⁶⁸ The key question focuses on the way the Internet is shaping and transforming individual and collective religious beliefs and practices.⁶⁹ Other researchers, such as Helen Berger, Douglas Ezzy, Mia Lövheim, Alf Linderman, Stewart Hoover, and Göran Larsson, can already exhibit some notable results in their combined research methods – partly due to the fact that they primarily focused on the question of how specific groups use modern media and the Internet in the context of ethnographic audience research.⁷⁰

The problem of constructing religious identity as an interplay of self representation and responses of others, particularly, requires consideration of not only online communication but also the religious and social experiences of the offline world: ” ... previous research into

⁶⁵ See Ezzy 2001 on the commercialization of witchcraft.

⁶⁶ See Dawson 2000, 29-31.

⁶⁷ Paccagnella 1997, 4.

⁶⁸ See Ackermann 2000, 287-289; O'Leary 2004, 48-49.

⁶⁹ See Campbell 2003, 217-218.

⁷⁰ See Berger & Ezzy 2004; Lövheim 2004, 48, 97-99; Linderman & Lövheim 2003, 233-238; Hoover et al. 2004, 11-17.

these issues makes it clear that we need to approach the construction of identity in relation to online interaction as a process *situated* in the structuring conditions of the offline as well as the online context.”⁷¹ Religious communication and presentation is part of a reciprocal process of constructing serious and durable identity in the interplay of online and offline social experiences.⁷²

Considering all these uncertainties related to pure online research in the field of religion, it seems to be promising to combine online research with classical empirical field work, such as quantitative surveys or qualitative interviews with users and webmasters. We will know more about religious individuals and the social conditions of religious communication on the Internet when we consolidate the results of online and offline research. Thus, there is no reason to hold back: the deeper insights that we can expect are auspicious – and many religious Internet users are keen to talk with attentive interviewers interested in their religious biography!

⁷¹ Lövheim 2004b, 61. Also see Lövheim 2004b, 60-63, 71-72.

⁷² See Lövheim 2004b, 67.

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⁷³ All websites were retrieved on 01/25/2005.