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The Dynamics of Religion, Media, and Community

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The Dynamics of Religion, Media, and Community

An Introduction

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Abstract

This article introduces the special issue, "The Dynamics of Religion, Media, and Community". It examines the shifting faith in the concept of religious community in the social studies of religion and calls attention to the normative expectations connected to the rise of new forms of communities in the age of the Internet. Against this backdrop, it discusses strengths and weakness of selected approaches in the study of media and religion and suggests future research pathways to which the articles in the special issue provide important contributions.

Keywords

Media; Religious community; Digital religion; Heidi Campbell

In this special issue of the *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet*, we investigate the dynamic relationship between religion, media, and community.[1] In doing so we return to a fundamental question shared by the founders of social theory – from Weber (1978 [1921]) and Simmel (1908) to Durkheim (1984 [1893]) – regarding the constitution of human groups. As the latter sociologist formulates it: "What are the bonds which unite men one with another?" (Durkheim 1888, p. 257). For all these scholars and most of their influential successors, community was the

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product of unmediated, face-to-face interactions between individuals, the modality and types of which sociology was meant to elucidate. In contrast to these key figures and many that followed them, we argue that this analysis only represents one side of the coin, and that an adequate answer to this question must take into consideration the role of media and mediated communication. Consequently, we seek to open new perspectives for the study of religion and media, and for research on religious communities more generally, in the contemporary world.

The contributions in this special issue tackle the dynamic relationship between religion, media, and community from different angles. The articles by Isabelle Jonveaux, Fabian Huber, Tim Hutchings, Andrea Rota and Alessandra Vitullo take their departure from the study of traditional religious communities to explore how the production, use, and interpretation of various (new) media affect such communities' internal dynamics. Anna Neumaier and co-authors Mirjam Aeschbach and Dorothea Lüddeckens, on the other hand, focus on how forms of religious communalization emerge through the use of digital media such as Internet forums and Twitter.

In this introduction, we provide a systematic overview of our research interests. First, we survey how the study of the relationship between religion and community has evolved throughout the twentieth century. In particular, we emphasize the role of 'community' as an idealized human condition in sociological discussions that served as a foil in discussions of the contemporary circumstances of religious life and efforts to prognosticate their future evolution. Second, we introduce the topic of religion and media and call attention to the perpetuation, in recent scholarship, of long-held normative positions with regard to the power of new media in shaping the social forms of religion. Against this backdrop, in our third point we offer some critical reflections with the goal of refining what we consider to be a fruitful approach to the study of religion and media: Heidi Campbell's 'religious-social shaping of technology'. Finally, in our fourth point, we summarize our suggestions and advance a new heuristic model. All along our reflections, we point to the articles in this special issue, highlighting their contributions to the advancement of scholarly research on the dynamic relationship between religion, media, and community.

1 Religion and Community

In the history of the social sciences of religion, the study of the relationship between religion and community has experienced shifting fortunes. Despite being at the core of the early sociological enquiry, during the twentieth century the dynamics of religious *Vergemeinschaftung* were relegated to a subordinate role in scholarly research. Only in recent years has this topic found new momentum among scholars of religion, in large part thanks to a growing interest in emerging social forms of

religion and their interrelation to electronic communication media. In this section we briefly sketch some past and present trends in this field of research and call attention to their historical situatedness.[2]

The nature of human bonds and the conditions of their possibility are among the fundamental concerns of political philosophy (e.g., Hume 1896; Montesquieu 1748; Rousseau 1762). Since the second half of the nineteenth century, the nascent science of sociology sought to reframe the philosophical debate and provide new answers to these questions (Aron 1967). Against the backdrop of accelerating industrialization and urbanization, the concept of *Gemeinschaft* – and its dynamic reinterpretation as a process of *Vergemeinschaftung*, or 'communalization' – provided the early sociologists with a foil for reflecting on the evolving forms of collective life in a societal context (*Gesellschaft, Vergesellschaftung*). Despite their different theoretical frameworks, the likes of Ferdinand Tönnies (1912 [1887]), Max Weber (1978 [1921]), and Emile Durkheim (1984 [1893]) all endeavored to explain the progressive transformation of human coexistence from an idealized time[3] in which human interactions were based on personal contacts and devoid of utilitarian intents toward a social condition characterized by the rise of impersonal, purposive exchanges.

The study of religious life and its evolution constituted an important resource for early theoretical reflections on the idea of community. Yet, the founding fathers of sociology anticipated a descending trajectory for both religion and community with the rise of modern society. Max Weber (1934 [1904–05]) famously identified the initial impulse toward the increasing rationalization of social relationships in the religious ethics of Calvinism. For Durkheim (1995 [1912]), religious practices and beliefs have their origin in the emotions of collective rituals and result in the sacralization of society itself. However, in his view, the social transformation away from the mechanical solidarity of small groups[4] weakens religion's capacity to play an integrative role at a social level and promotes the reverence of individual autonomy (Durkheim 1898, 1984 [1893], pp. 118–123).[5] Drawing on these insights, sociologists emphasized the connection between religion and

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[2]   Reasons of space and scope do not allow us to address several important aspects of this debate, such as the role that studies of new religious movements have played in revitalizing research on religious communities and organizations since the 1960s (Barker 1999; Arweck 2006), the influence of political interest in minority religions and diasporic communities on the work of sociologists and scholars of religion (Jödicke 2010; Baumann 2012), and the growing research on evangelical churches in local and global perspective (Stolz et al. 2014; Elwert, Radermacher & Schlamelcher 2017). Recent handbook articles by some of the contributors to this special issue include these topics in their systematic overviews of the study of religious communities (Neumaier & Schlamelcher 2014; Lüddeckens & Walthert 2018).

[3]   Many authors have criticized the idealized and romanticized conception of 'community' in the work of Tönnies and other (early) sociologists (see Lüddeckens & Walthert 2018, p. 470).

[4]   Durkheim, who was a critical reader of Tönnies (Durkheim 1889), does not explicitly use the term 'community' in his work, but distinguishes between two forms of solidarity – mechanical and organic – in ways akin to Tönnies's distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*.

[5]   Neo-Durkheimian scholars in the functionalist tradition, most prominently Robert Bellah (1967), have nevertheless ascribed this role to forms of *civil religion* in the modern world.

the social form of community. Consequently, the process of *Vergesellschaftung* – driven by an increasing functional differentiation of the social spheres – became a fundamental element in the constitution of the secularization paradigm, which predicted the progressive fading of religion within modern societies (Tschannen 1991; Lüddeckens & Walthert 2018, pp. 474–475).

Within European sociology, the crisis of the traditional churches provided further empirical support for the secularization paradigm. The unilateral focus on the fate of these institutions among 'church sociologists' (*Kirchensoziologen*, e.g., Le Bras 1955; Wölber 1959), however, also sparked critical reactions epitomized by Thomas Luckmann's famous essay *The Invisible Religion* (1967). Central to Luckmann's argument was the possibility of dissociating religious life from both the traditional form of the community and the modern institutional organizations of the churches. According to Luckmann, in contemporary society, religion becomes a 'private affair' and the object of subjective choices that individuals can make in a pluralized field of religious suppliers. In the wake of this critique, much research has focused on the subjective construction of the religious self (e.g., Taylor 2002), individual religious trajectories and interpretations (e.g., Bellah 1985), and non-institutional forms of spirituality (e.g., Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Knoblauch 2009; Hero 2010). These studies point away from community-based forms of religiosity and toward a new 'fluid religion' (Lüddeckens & Walthert 2010).

Against the backdrop of increasing religious individualization, however, the question of religious communalization has regained traction in recent years. Scholars have called attention to the ways in which individuals connect with various groups throughout their religious 'peregrinations' (Hervieu-Léger 1999; Bochinger, Engelbrecht & Gebhardt 2009) and to the emergence of "intimate circles and mass meetings" (Gauthier 2014) in the context of globalization. In line with Weber's definition of a community, these new forms of religious assembly are predicated on the "subjective feeling of the parties […] that they belong together" (Weber 1978, p. 40). However, they do not present a number of other characteristics that are usually part of the scholarly and everyday understanding of a community. In particular, these so-called 'posttraditional communities' (Hitzler 1998) rest on purely voluntary participation and live a fleeting existence: they crystallize around (mediatized) events (WJT 2007; Hepp & Krönert 2009), during which like-minded individuals gather for short periods of intense, shared emotional experience (Gebhardt 2010), and part ways thereafter without establishing any lasting community structures (Hitzler, Honer & Pfadenhauer 2008).

In addition to pointing out the transient nature of contemporary communities and their noncommittal structures, recent scholarship has also emphasized their new approach to space. Traditional communities of place, blood, and interest (Tönnies 1912) were characterized by close-range contacts and face-to-face interactions, and conventional congregations are still embedded in a local context (Chaves 2004; Monnot 2013). In contrast, emerging forms of community are regarded

as increasingly 'disembedded' (Giddens 1990) forms of trans-local association (Hepp & Krotz 2012) that exist as virtual 'communities of communication' (Knoblauch 2008), if not as sheer imagined realities (Anderson 1983). Not surprisingly, these studies converge with a renewed interest in the relationship between media and religion. It is therefore to this field that we now turn.

2 Religion and Media

The earliest research on religion and the Internet was fueled by the interest in new forms of community. Drawing on Emile Durkheim's understanding of the close relationship between religion and a moral community, Lorne Dawson asked, "[W]hat are we to make of the possibility of religion in cyberspace? Can individuals communicating by computer from the comfort of their homes practice their religion? […] *Have real communities emerged online?*" (Dawson 2004, pp. 75–76, our emphasis). Dawson urged us to rethink our concepts of community, taking into consideration new forms of interaction, commitment, and solidarity made possible by the rise of the Internet (Dawson 2004, pp. 80–86).

Early research was partly driven by the idea that religion on the Internet would rapidly and completely replace traditional religious forms. Stephen D. O'Leary (2004, p. 40), Lynn Schofield Clark (2002, p. 7), Hubert Mohr (2009, p. 180), and Christopher Helland assumed that online religion would introduce freedom, democracy, and diversity to the religious field, much as the Reformation did 500 years ago. According to Helland (2004, p. 30), thanks to the Internet, "[D]octrines 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." The first generation of scholars in this domain imagined that traditional hierarchies would be overcome by an egalitarian network society; Helland even claimed that the experience of online religions was equivalent to the state of *communitas* that Victor Turner postulated as the central element of rites of passage:

> Because it acts as a great leveler once people have gone on-line, Internet participation forces this same form of liminality upon its users. Status disappears, no social class has dominion over any other, and everyone is forced into an accommodation of equality in which a particular form of non-structured interaction can take place. (Helland 2000, p. 215)

These early expectations rearticulate a pattern linking media innovation to a utopian community ideal that can be traced back to the Age of Enlightenment (Krüger 2015, pp. 78–80). Today, it is evident that the celebrated experiments with online churches – such as the *Church of Fools*

(Hutchings 2017) – proved to have a marginal impact in the contemporary religious world. Conversely, new hierarchies and institutions are omnipresent on the Web. In her contribution to this special issue, Anna Neumaier pushes back against simplistic and monolithic concepts of an idealized religious community online and calls for a more complex understanding of the various forms of community that can emerge on the Internet. Combining precise empirical analysis and insightful theoretical reflection, she scrutinizes the significance of online Christian communities for individual users and proposes a sophisticated typology of the diverse social bonds that can be established in and through online discussion boards.

The counterpoint to the 'utopian' approach to the analysis of media and religious community can be found in certain lines of the so-called mediatization theory. Media scholars, most notably Knut Lundby and Stig Hjarvard, advocate a thesis according to which religion has generally declined during the process of modernization, in which the diffusion of new media figures prominently. In this context, they regard modern media as agents of secularization that promote "banal religious elements" such as the belief in magic instead of the traditional doctrines of religious institutions (Hjarvard 2008, p. 24; Lundby 2016, p. 35). The relation between mediatization and community is further emphasized by Andreas Hepp, among others. In his view, mediatization prompts the dissolution of the local community through an ever-increasing push toward deterritorialization (Hepp 2011, pp. 112–115). In her contribution to this special issue, however, Alessandra Vitullo calls attention to the entangled relationship between localized and delocalized aspects of communal life. Drawing on the example of the multisite *LifePoint Church* and on a closer analysis of its Brussels campus, Vitullo discusses the strategies of local congregants to extend their exchanges online in ways that differ from the official communicational concept of the Church leadership.

Such proactive use of media technologies by church members highlights another striking feature of Hjarvard's and Lundby's take on the mediatization of society, namely their neglect of the role of religions as media agents. The systematic downplaying of this role in their work echoes the underlying opposition of (modern) media and religion that has been a common theme of theological debates on religion in television since the 1970s. According to this logic, 'the media' are replacing religion and, consequently, to consider the churches as media actors would contradict the very foundation of this argument (Krüger 2018, p. 11). Thus, both scholarly perspectives discussed so far – the utopian community ideal as well as the secularization approach – are predicated on a normative stance which, basically, updates the opposition between the organic life of a community and the instrumental workings of society introduced by Tönnies (1887). Such a normative position has been perpetuated by later generations of sociologists up through Werner Stark (1966–72), including such prominent and insightful scholars as Thomas Luckmann and Peter Berger (1966). According to the latter authors, in pre-modern times – before the Reformation and the Industrial

Age – people were still embedded in a 'holy cosmos' and lived in homogeneous communities. This image is invoked, for example, by Lundby when he compares mediatization (which parallels secularization) to an organic phenomenon to describe how the influence of the media spread "like a disease" in late modern societies (Lundby 2009, p. 2). Reviewing Lundby's thesis, Larissa Carneiro concludes sharp-sightedly:

> Lundby's use of the trope of an infectious disease is not haphazard. Disease implies at least two different things. First, that we are not well but sickened by hidden agents infecting our bodies. Second, it also implies that something that once was immaculate is now irremediably poisoned by the logic of contemporary media. This perception of loss of what was previously pure is existentially profound. (Carneiro 2015, p. 54)

For a theory of religion, media, and community, it is crucial to consider the normative impact of these approaches. The first one proclaims a future ideal community that is spurred by the rise of the Internet; the second one assesses the decay of the original religious institutions and communities caused by an intensified mediatization process. Although their goals are opposite, the two approaches share a common core element: they rest upon the so-called medium theory established by Marshall McLuhan (1962), Walter Ong (1982), and Joshua Meyrowitz (1986) since the 1960s. Here, media are understood as autonomous agents that have a more or less deterministic impact on universal social change:

> As the printing press paved the way for a social and political revolution, so will the Internet – as a kind of generalized media platform – promote a whole new social infrastructure. Thus, media are not only channels of interaction, but mould the ways in which the interaction takes place. Communication and media structures will play the same role as natural and physical infrastructures have played in the past. (Hjarvard 2004, p. 44)

Not surprisingly, the medium theory has been largely criticized in the general media-sociological debate (see, e.g., Deacon & Stanyer 2014) and in the specific field of religion and media (see Krüger 2018). In fact, media sociologists called attention early on to the other side of the coin, noting that "[T]he question [is] not 'What do the media do to people?' but, rather, 'What do people do with the media?'" (Katz & Foulkes 1962, p. 378). The latter question implies the rejection of claims that postulate a determined effect of a certain medium on society or religion. Instead, it invites us to adopt an approach that searches for different modes of media use and reception among different social groups (defined by age, gender, education, cultural/religious background, etc.) and takes historical dynamics into account. This type of media research belongs to the canon of social sciences (Ayaß 2012), and benefits from innovative approaches in the field of media anthropology

that analyze media use in the context of social, ritual, and physical practices (Meyer 2012). Furthermore, it introduces a multifaceted perspective on the question of agency, shedding light on the complex dynamics between media production and content, on the one hand, and its reception and use on the other (Lövheim 2012, pp. 133, 141–142).

3   The Religious-Social Shaping of Media: Critical Reflections on a Fruitful Research Paradigm

Most influential for the development of this research program in the field of religion and media is the concept of 'religious-social shaping of technology' put forward by the media scholar Heidi Campbell. Referring to the initial study of Diane Zimmerman-Umble (1992) on the successful introduction of the telephone within an Amish community in Pennsylvania, Campbell posited that in those religious communities that are cautious or critical of technology, new media must undergo a process of *spiritualization* or *domestication*. This process allows for new media to be contextualized in a social environment and promotes their interpretation according to a religious framework, which defuses the perceived threat posed by 'secular' technologies and harmonizes their use with religious beliefs and goals (Campbell 2010, pp. 41–63). As Campbell (2013, p. 64) emphasizes, "Social-shaping approaches to technology […] provide interesting conclusions about how religious groups may culture a technology such as the Internet so that it can be incorporated into the community and provide opportunities for group or self-expression within these boundaries."[6]

Campbell's approach has proven to be extremely useful and was applied in many studies on the media practices of religious communities. Following her insights, our goal is to move beyond McLuhan's (1994) scope of 'understanding media' toward an approach that investigates "religious practice in the new media worlds" (Campbell 2013). Furthermore, thanks to the advancement of research and to new insights in the complexity of religious media use, we are now able to identify some of the limits of Campbell's model and suggest a number of improvements to it.

First, Campbell's concept of religious-social shaping of media technology is very much focused on religious institutions. Accordingly, it assumes that new media technology is perceived as a problem by theological authorities and then – after a process of negotiation – is admitted for use within the community. This perspective might prove very fruitful for the analysis of highly secluded and homogeneous groups such as some Amish communities and the ultra-orthodox Jews in Israel, which may exercise strong social control over their members. In line with this framework, in her

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[6]   For instance, Campbell applied her analytical concept to the process of religious-social shaping of the kosher cell phone within the Israeli ultra-orthodox community (Campbell 2010, pp. 162–178).

contribution to this special issue Isabelle Jonveaux provides us with insights into the adoption of digital media in Catholic monasteries and the significance of these new technologies for local and translocal networks both at the level of the institution and at the level of individual monks. As Jonveaux illustrates, in monastic contexts religious authorities function as gatekeepers regulating the inflow of new technologies into the community. In many cases, however, new media are already part of the daily professional and private lives of religious people. Consequently, religious authorities do not have the exclusive power to determine the use of media technology.

More generally, individual and collective agency with respect to media practices is diversified and can vary depending on the setting, adjusting, for instance, to family, peers, and professional frames. Only in some cases do religious authorities explicitly address 'dangers' and recommend 'good' media practice. While such admonitions are common, for example, in Evangelical or Pentecostal communities in the United States, especially with regard to the threats of pornography and online gambling, mainstream European churches rarely tackle these matters. When they do, the moral discourse on media can indeed have an effect on the identity of a religious community, especially when recommendations are presented and discussed in study groups. Even in these cases, however, it would be misleading to assume that guidelines from the religious hierarchy unequivocally determine how the members use media. In his contribution to this volume, Andrea Rota calls attention to precisely this issue. Drawing on the example of Jehovah's Witnesses, he highlights the possible discontinuities between the normative expectations within a religious community and the actual media practices of its individual members. Against this backdrop, Rota deploys a socio-philosophical theory of collective intentionality to reframe the concept of community and separate the constitutive dynamics of a religious group from the personal attitudes of its members.

The second aspect of Campbell's model that needs to be reassessed concerns the diachronic dynamics of media use. The focus on institutional positions and the idea of religious gatekeepers who define the rules of media use convey an image of the religious-social shaping of technology as a one-time process of domestication. At the end of this process, a new medium (or some of its functions) is either rejected or integrated into the community's religious framework. Actually, the religious evaluation and use of media may change over time and even reverse earlier decisions. Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, enthusiastically embraced the radio as a heavenly means of mission work in the early 1920s. However, after numerous conflicts with public broadcasting networks, they withdrew from the radio mission, denouncing what they perceived as a sinister coalition of churches and politicians who opposed the propagation of God's message. Thereafter, their mission focused on door-to-door visits, during which sermons were played to the householder on a portable gramophone (Krüger & Rota 2015, pp. 84–96; Rota 2018). Regarding the Internet, it took the Jehovah's Witnesses nearly 20 years to find a valid strategy. While they cautioned their

members and the general public about the risks of online adult content, violence, and time-wasting for almost two decades, in 2012 they introduced a refurbished website with a wide range of media offerings, including videos for children and TV-format streaming shows. In a sense, Jehovah's Witnesses created their own domesticated Internet, which enabled them to integrate online content in their weekly meetings (Krüger & Rota 2015, pp. 97–104; Rota 2018). In sum, changes in the interpretation and use of media can be the outcome of theological disputes and pragmatic or economic considerations within religious communities, as well as of general trends in media use in certain societies or milieus.

The third aspect of Campbell's approach that deserves closer consideration is the dynamic interplay of media reception and media production in today's religious world. In Campbell's work, media are constructed mainly as a moral dilemma for media recipients. The idea that new media have to be spiritualized basically implies that more often than not there is a clash between (secular) media and religion, echoing a Christian – in particular Protestant – skepticism toward all mediated forms of the divine. A side effect of the reproduction of this antagonism in scholarly works is that researchers tend to overlook the production of media *within* religious communities. In fact, the distinction between media producers and recipients is largely obsolete, especially considering how, in the public sphere, religious media are distributed on a continuum that ranges from institutionalized books, journals, radio and TV broadcasts, and video and audio streaming channels to individually managed blogs, vlogs, homepages, social media accounts, and discussion forums. Focusing on the latter end of the continuum, Mirjam Aeschbach and Dorothea Lüddeckens analyze how British Muslims used the social network Twitter to initiate a counterstrike against a controversial article published in the *Sunday Times* purporting to uncover the inconvenient truth about "What British Muslims Really Think". On the basis of this case study, Aeschbach and Lüddeckens urge us to rethink our traditional concepts of community in view of new forms of communalization sparked by event-based hashtag discourses.

In addition to spontaneous modes of collective participation in mediated forms of community building, individual contributions to the production and distribution of religious media can reflect a commitment to the community. Charismatic churches such as the Assembly of Vineyard Churches depend on the voluntary engagement of local congregants for the production of their media, and groups as diverse as Jehovah's Witnesses and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) rely on the missionary zeal of their members to spread their books and journals. In his contribution 'Media, Milieu, and Community', Fabian Huber illustrates how the Vineyard movement's self-produced media nourish a fluid Evangelical milieu. He argues that a direct connection between media production, media use, and integration in the community is too shortsighted. To correct the deficiencies of such a linear model, Huber combines empirical data and

systematic reflections inspired by Weber's methodological individualism to develop a multilayered analysis of the complex interplay between face-to-face and media-based communication.

The attention to the voluntary engagement of religious community members leads us to the economic dimension of media production and use. Max Weber acknowledged that all steady pastoral care and mission work depend on an economic foundation – all religious communities are therefore simultaneously religious and economic bodies (Weber 1978 [1921], pp. 452–453). While some mainstream churches in various countries are tax funded, most other religious communities rely heavily on voluntary or low-paid work by their adherents, who expect spiritual benefits in return. In addition to the offer of 'ritual services for a fee', the production and distribution of books, journals, and digital media constitute a significant contribution to the economy of religious groups.

Jehovah's Witnesses' 'Bethels' (Houses of God) are a striking example: in these enclosed communities, several hundred volunteers who usually live and work on-site for a number of years carry out various organizational tasks and actively contribute to the material development of print and online media on a global scale. In less centralized social settings such as the Swiss and German Evangelical milieu, volunteer work is essential to oversee the smooth working of media during services (e.g., audio equipment for music, video presentations) and to ensure the production of, for example, music recordings, podcasts, videos, homepages, and social media content. All in all, the economic need may result in a stronger engagement of individual members, while the pluralization of media opens more opportunities for non-experts to engage in the life of the community.

The commercial undertakings in the business of religious media represent yet another interesting dimension. In his contribution to this special issue, Tim Hutchings presents the case of the Christian video game *Guardians of Ancora*, discussing both the producer's concept and the actual process of reception in a congregation.

4 A Dynamic Model

To conclude, we would like to summarize our suggestions and advance a tentative model of the dynamics of religion, media, and community. Our model invites scholars to conceive a religious community through the various dimensions of its 'media work'. As a product of such work, a religious community cannot be understood as something static, but must be rather envisioned as a process of continuous (re)production.
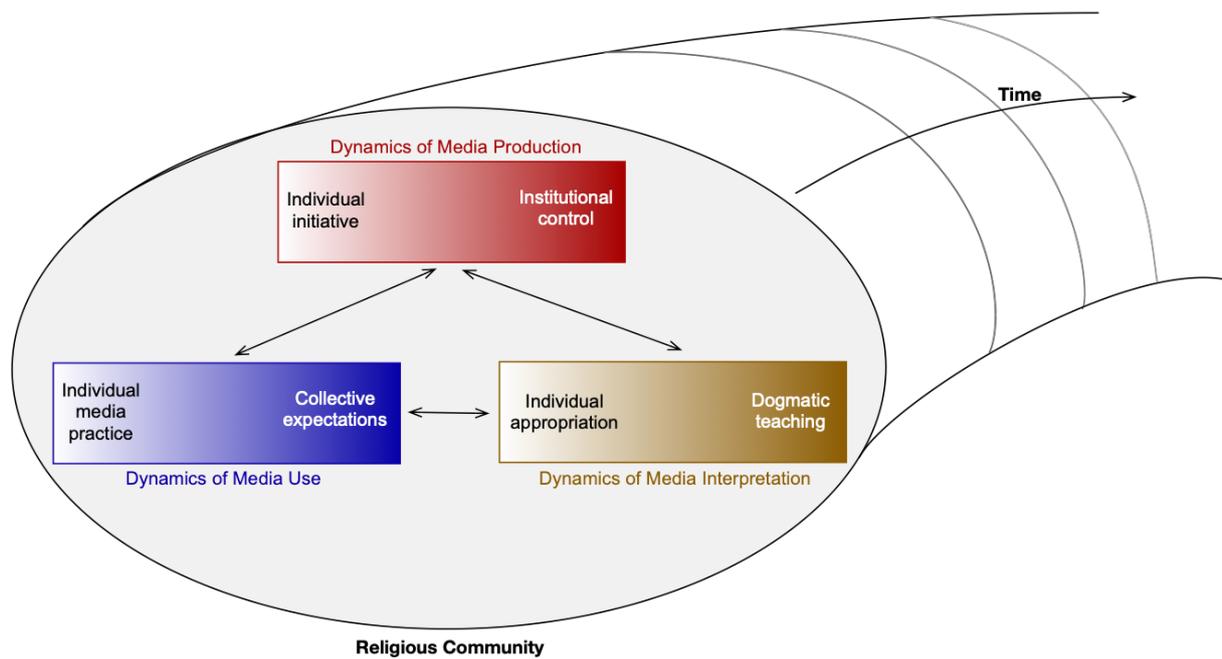
Figure 1: The Dynamics of Religion, Media, and Community

In this sense, we introduce the first dynamic dimension by calling attention to the dialectic relationships between media production, media interpretation, and media use that characterize a religious community. We do not consider the relationships among these three aspects to be in any way deterministic. On the contrary, we take them all to be essential objects of empirical investigation and we underscore that they can evolve over time. Thus, we integrate a second dynamic dimension – time. Finally, to account for the possibility – indeed, the virtual inevitability – of such diachronic evolution, the model emphasizes a third dynamic dimension inherent to each aspect in itself, namely the interplay of individualistic and collectivistic modes of interaction. The relationship between these modes of interaction can – although it must not necessarily – lead to tensions and to the development, within a community, of various strategies designed to manage divergent needs, practices, and attitudes.

At the level of media production, our model underscores how the media output of a community can be more or less closely subjected to institutional control. As noted above, while some religious communities rely on a centralized production system, others are dependent on the initiative of their members for the creation and distribution of their media content. Mixed forms are

also possible, although that might call for particular structures to coordinate the efforts of various media producers within the community.

Similarly, with respect to their interpretation of media, religious communities can develop complex dogmatic teachings to evaluate, for instance, their moral value. However, most religious communities will treat media as mere practical utilities; the concrete appropriation of a medium, thus, will be a matter of individual preferences. Again, these dimensions are not mutually exclusive and, indeed, the development of a particular media interpretation among the members of a religious community can provide the input toward a more systematic doctrinal reflection that can, in the end, institutionalize or reject such an interpretation.

At the level of media use our model distinguishes between the collective expectations of a community on how to deal with various media and the actual practices of the individual members. As indicated above, while these can converge, they do not necessarily overlap. Of course, the processes described so far do not take place in a vacuum, but include exchanges with the surrounding social world, in which similar dynamics are also at play.

In conclusion, the model can also serve as a heuristic device to distinguish between different types of religious community and different forms of religious communalization. Following the internal distinctions presented above for each aspect of media production, interpretation, and use, we can develop two ideal types: an individualistic and a collectivistic one. In the first case, the community can be typically conceived as an aggregation of people sharing similar values, habits, and practices. In the second case, the community would be conceptualized in holistic terms on the basis of compulsory, normative teachings, expectations, and organizational forms. In our opinion, the study of the actual blending of these ideal types and the analysis of the resulting social dynamics constitutes a crucial field for both empirical research and theoretical reflection.

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Christian Online Communities

Insights from Qualitative and Quantitative Data

Anna Neumaier

Abstract

Since the rise of the Internet, traditional religious communities have either embraced or struggled with new media. At the same time, a significant number of believers turns to new media as a substitute for or supplement to offline communities. Researching these users raises some crucial questions that guide my contribution: Do these users find or build communities online and, if so, how do these communities differ from offline equivalents, and how can they be grasped theoretically? Based on findings from a quantitative survey among Christian Internet users, I will first illustrate the emergence of personal relationships among Internet discussion board users and their perception of an actual online community. Then, based on qualitative research, I will elaborate three types of community existing within the discussion boards. Relating these types to classical (Weber, Tönnies) as well as recent (Anderson, Hitzler, Hepp) theoretical approaches to community, I will argue that the characteristics of social media do not unidirectionally determine any specific kind of community online. Rather, the needs of users as well as their offline religious affiliations are decisive and result in a broad range of online communities that can mirror such traditional forms as the *Dorfgemeinschaft*, as well as more recent types such as imagined or posttraditional communities.

1 Introduction

Since the rise of the Internet, traditional religious communities have either embraced or struggled with new media. At the same time, believers turn to the Internet in search of alternative spaces for

religion-related purposes. In social networks, on picture or video sharing sites, blogs and discussion boards, users debate religion and beliefs, share representations of their religious identities, and conduct mediated religious activities such as mutual prayers. In doing so, long-lasting ties between users emerge. Some users choose online platforms as their preferred place to go for religious purposes, complementing or even superseding local religious alternatives. This raises questions for research on religious Internet use: What makes online spaces suitable and attractive for religious use? To what extent can the use of the Internet for religious purposes replace or complement offline religious affiliations and/or activities? What are the relative advantages and disadvantages of online and offline religious activities?

Many distinct aspects can be considered in this regard. In the following, I will focus on 'community' as a potential feature of online spaces. This choice is based on the assumption that 'community' is often a distinct attribute of the offline manifestations of religious traditions, especially in the context of Christian traditions (which comprise the field of research presented here). If online platforms are to be taken seriously as potential new places for debates on and practice of religion, their capacity to enable religious communality must be addressed. This quality is of specific importance for any kind of comparison to offline religious institutions and social contexts: if online platforms are capable of being used to create and sustain religious communities, they are potentially able to substitute for an important feature of offline religion. And if they are not, but are still perceived by some as the main hub for religious activities, it would imply that communality is, to a certain extent, obsolete. Therefore, we must ask whether the respective online platforms offer features of community-like sociality, or if community becomes obsolete in the process of religion going online (or, as a third possibility, if community has already become obsolete in offline contexts as well).

To grapple with these questions, I will present findings from a study of online Christian discussion boards and their users. While most existing research mainly considers the platforms themselves – their media characteristics and their potential for community building – I will prioritize the users' views on the emergence of social relationships and, more specifically, on communities during their use of discussion boards. This has its rationale in my theoretical approach, which I will elaborate after a short summary of existing research on this topic. Subsequently, I will present quantitative as well as qualitative data on the emergence of communities in religious Internet use, and discuss them in light of the theoretical approaches. My key argument here is that no specific form of 'online community' emerges that can be said to characterize this field, nor are the forms of community that appear online limited to those described in contemporary studies of transformations of communities and networks. Rather, the needs of users as well as their offline religious affiliations are decisive and result in a broad range of online communities that can

resemble such traditional forms as the *Dorfgemeinschaft* (village community), as well as more recent types such as 'imagined' or 'posttraditional communities'.

2 The Old, the New, and the Virtual? An Overview of Community Theory

Debates on community have long suggested that along with changes in society and media come changes in community: close-knit, face-to-face communities (for example, those that result from cohabitation in a nineteenth-century village) transform slowly over time into translocal communities or, perhaps more accurately, networks of loosely bound individuals. However, with regard to community theory, this teleological account deserves a closer look. A thorough examination is also needed to develop the research instruments to study online communities, since such instruments need to specify quite precisely the unit of analysis – that is, community – in order to be able to look for it in the process of data analysis.[1] Therefore, the questions guiding this section are: What concepts frame the sociological debate about community? What is their relationship to contemporary developments in society and the influence of media in that regard? And how can they be operationalized for empirical research?

Early but still influential approaches to community include those by Ferdinand Tönnies and Max Weber. In his volume *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (first published in 1887), Tönnies distinguishes *Gemeinschaft* (community) from *Gesellschaft* (society). Community is "real and organic life" (*reales und organisches Leben*; Tönnies 2005, p. 3), whereas society is, in Tönnies's understanding, a rather mechanical entity. Community here relates to a familiar, intimate, exclusive mode of living together and being with one's kin from birth, while society is something that one enters as a stranger (ibid.). Compared to cohabitation in society, which is transient and superficial, life in a community is enduring, a long-lasting condition of genuinely living together.[2] Max Weber's approach is similar to a certain extent. However, his distinction between *Vergemeinschaftung* and *Vergesellschaftung* focuses on the processes of how communities and societies emerge and persist. In his conceptualization, communities are characterized by a feeling of belonging together, which is experienced individually and works on an affective or traditional basis. In contrast, society is rooted in the rationally motivated balance of interests (Weber 2005, p. 29).

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[1] In a larger research project on religious Internet use, other social forms such as groups and networks were also included. The findings, however, suggested that for understanding religion-related social interactions online, the different concepts of 'community' corresponded better to the empirical data. For an elaboration on this issue, see Neumaier 2016, 264–77.

[2] "*[D]as dauernde und echte Zusammenleben, Gesellschaft nur rein vorübergehendes und scheinbares*" (Tönnies 2005, p. 5).

Both Weber and Tönnies consider families to be core types of community, but also regard neighborhoods and other types of close cohabitation, as well as shared attitudes, as bases for communities (ibid.; Tönnies 2005, pp. 8–14). Among those communities based on 'shared attitudes', Tönnies includes religious communities, which can exist regardless of geographical proximity because, according to Tönnies, religious beliefs are a particularly stable basis for a feeling of belonging together (ibid.). Weber's approach is similar, although he emphasizes the procedural nature when he introduces *Vergemeinschaftung* (formation of community) and *Vergesellschaftung* (formation of society) instead of *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society). In his understanding, it is not simply the shared beliefs that are a sufficient condition for defining a community, but ultimately the sense of belonging that leads members to orient themselves toward each other (Weber 2005, pp. 30–31).[3] So while these approaches were developed within a specific historical context and the archetypal picture of a community is that of a close-knit village community in contrast to the groupings that form in conditions of accelerating urbanization, Tönnies and Weber also point out other forms of community, among them a *Gemeinschaft des Geistes* ('community of the mind'), where a high degree of like-mindedness among its members makes up for a lack of shared bloodlines or place of residence.

In more recent times and due to societal changes, there has been extensive reflection among scholars of different disciplines on the dimensions of community. In 1983, Benedict Anderson proposed the idea of an 'imagined community'. Referring mainly to nation-states, he depicted the image of a community where members neither know one another nor live together: "[T]he members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them" (Anderson 2006, p. 6). Nevertheless, they experience the nation as "a deep, horizontal comradeship" (ibid., p. 7), feel connected to each other, and are willing to die or kill for the community. In his view, this concept of an 'imagined community' is applicable to every community too big to allow for face-to-face interaction.

While Anderson developed his concept in the early 1980s, in the wake of more recent processes of postindustrialization, globalization, and mediatization a number of related approaches have developed the idea of not only translocal, but also non-binding communities. Ronald Hitzler, for example, has coined the term 'posttraditional community', which refers to a community that one is not born into, but becomes a member of by choice, based on the shared interests of the individual members (Hitzler 2008). As a consequence, it does not embrace its members in their entirety, but only connects to parts of their identity. Moreover, these communities, as well as membership in them, only last for a limited time. Altogether, these kinds of communities are regarded as optional and fluid (Hitzler et al., pp. 17–18). For the time being, though, members of the community adopt

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[3]   See also Huber in this special issue.

shared signs, symbols and rituals, a distinct awareness of the community, and clear-cut external borders. As such, the community turns out to be relatively stable despite its temporary existence (ibid., p. 16).

A similar concept is that of the 'deterritorial community' as developed by Andreas Hepp. In Hepp's approach, a deterritorial community is one type of translocal community that is characterized specifically by ultimately abandoning any local references. Examples can be found in communities that coalesce around subjects from popular culture, social movements, or religious communities (Hepp 2008, p. 135, Fig. 1). Again, it is the feeling of belonging together and a shared horizon of meaning – which extend beyond any territory – that are important for these kinds of communities; Hepp here, in fact, refers to Weber (ibid., p. 133). Nevertheless, Hepp describes these deterritorial communities as exhibiting local agglomerations, which are marked by face-to-face-interaction and local roots, but then form an overarching network with a shared translocal horizon of meaning (ibid., p. 133–4). Apart from that, deterritorial and posttraditional communities share basic features, foremost being that they are both communities of choice.

A 'community' can, therefore, be defined by drawing on a spectrum of characteristics. From a systematizing perspective, the diverse characteristics described in the various approaches can be categorized into three sets: a) physical properties; b) action-related properties; and c) symbolic or idea-related properties. *Physical attributes* of a community generally refer to living in close proximity to one another (e.g., in one house, street, or village) and knowing one another face-to-face. These aspects are often associated with classical approaches like those of Weber and Tönnies, although those approaches do not focus exclusively on close-knit village communities, but also include symbolic togetherness. *Action-related properties* include internal interaction and support as well as shared rituals and activities. The approaches discussed above do not foreground these aspects, although exchange, communication, support or other joint activities play a role in almost all of the approaches, and with the Internet, communication as a basis for a community takes on a particularly important role. With regard to *symbolic or idea-related properties*, the various approaches often only mention a 'corporate feeling' or a 'shared identity'. Others go into greater detail, referring not only to the feeling of belonging together, but also to shared norms, values, narratives, and frameworks of interpretation, recognition of the external borders of the community, and relationships to individuals (rather than professional roles) – in a nutshell, the awareness of being a member of a community.

All attributes of communities that are mentioned in the approaches discussed above can be assigned to one of these categories. However, it is important to note that different approaches define different characteristics as *sine qua non* for the existence of a community. With regard to online communities, some hypotheses suggest themselves. Above all, local proximity and face-to-face interaction and acquaintanceship seem obsolete and insignificant for a scientific analysis. Rather,

the translocal and anonymous exchange online seems to promote only temporal and non-binding relations, which may fit in with the transformation of communities diagnosed by recent approaches. In the following, I will have a closer look at approaches focusing specifically on online communities, then at some empirical data that suggest a more complex picture of religious communities on the Internet.

3 Online Religious Communities – The State of Research and Some Questions

With the rise of the Internet, questions about the possibility of communities within this medium started to gain in importance. Similar to the three waves of research on religion and the Internet described by Højsgaard and Warburg (2005), Heidi Campbell finds three waves of research on online communities (Campbell 2013, pp. 60–4).[4] Studies in the first wave approach this field with fascination, sometimes fall for utopian or dystopian discourses, and mostly restrict themselves to describing community formation online (ibid., pp. 60–1.). These are followed, around the turn of the millennium, by a second wave of research that moves toward a critical analysis of online communities, examining different forms of online communities and querying the relationship between online and offline communities (ibid., pp. 61–2). Since then, increasingly theoretical perspectives on online communities have developed that apply, for example, theories of social capital or organization identity and ask refined questions about the relationship between offline communities and their use of online technologies (ibid., pp. 63–4). Campbell concludes that recent research points to changes in traditional forms of community and to online groups functioning as "loose social networks with varying levels of religious affiliation and commitment" (ibid., p. 64).

As Campbell shows, there has been a broad range of research on online religious communities. However, only a few publications ever clearly define their understanding of community. Probably best known are the early understandings of Howard Rheingold and Barry Wellman, which describe online communities in general, without a specific focus on religion.[5] In the early 1990s, Howard Rheingold coined the term 'virtual community', referring to relationships of users that emerge if "enough people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (Rheingold 1993, p. 5). Only a few years later, an understanding of 'networks' as predominant social forms within the Internet became prominent, represented by, among others, Wellman, who argues that "the Net successfully maintains strong, supportive community ties, and it may be increasing the number and diversity of

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[4]   See also Vitullo in this special issue.
[5]   In this regard, see also Baym 1998, Deterding 2008, Etzioni & Etzioni 1999, Jones 1998, Kollock & Smith 1999.

weak ties. […] Indeed, the very architecture of computer networks promotes market-like situations" (Wellman 1999, pp. 185–6).

From the early 2000s on, research on online religion also considered questions of online religious communities. Among the earliest was probably Dawson, with the considerations he put forward in his chapter "Religion and the Quest for Virtual Community" (Dawson 2004). Based on the premise that, for most people, being religious still implies being part of a group (Dawson 2004, p. 75), he addresses doubts about the emergence of online communities as well as methodological questions regarding research on online communities. In this regard, he discusses two common misconceptions, emphasizing that communities are often "associated too much with a romanticized notion of life in the small towns and villages of the past", and that religious life is "associated too much with a Western congregational model" while traditional communities are being rapidly replaced by social networks (Dawson 2004, p. 76). The crucial question, then, is how to detect a community online or, to put it in other words, how the concept of community can be operationalized. Dawson here suggests interactivity, stability of membership as well as of identity, 'netizenship' (i.e., regular use of the Internet), social control, personal concern, and occurrence in a public space as crucial aspects of the existence of a virtual community (Dawson 2004, p. 83). In an early empirical study of online community members, Campbell focuses on key attributes of online religious communities that the users themselves find desirable: relationship, care (giving and receiving support and encouragement), value (being valued as an individual), connection (frequent contact with their online partners), intimate communication (going beyond the small talk), and shared faith (Campbell 2005, pp. 181–6.). In contrast to Dawson, she emphasizes rather the emotional and supportive interaction between users as a criterion for the existence of an online religious community. Nonetheless, both approaches can be brought together, as some of Campbell's criteria correlate with Dawson's 'personal concern', while some aspects that Dawson identified – e.g., long-lasting interaction – might be preconditions for precisely this kind of care and intimacy. However, in a later study, Campbell herself argues for understanding online communities as networks because doing so would mirror general developments in contemporary society:

> Today, the image of a community bound strictly to geographic, ethnic, or culturally fixed relationships does not always seem applicable, especially within Western urban society. […] This tendency towards dynamic networked identity also arguably informs practices of public religion. (Campbell 2013, pp. 66–68).

Other researchers differentiate between distinct types of community. Kim, for example, recognizes four types of religious community that can also be found online: a belief community that provides a system of beliefs and practices; a relational community that satisfies the need for belonging; an

affective community that provides a group identity; and a utilitarian community that provides a means of resource mobilization (Kim 2005, p. 147). He argues, however, that online religious communities can fulfill more than one or even all of these functions. On the other hand, not every user seeks all of these functions from online communities; for example, someone may have no need for belonging (ibid.). Hutchings, in a study of online churches, differentiates between the Rheingold definition of community and an alternative approach that criticizes online communities as merely virtual, that is, unreal, and puts face-to-face interaction at the core of community (Hutchings 2015). He argues that his case, the 'Church of Fools', a virtual Christian church sponsored by the Methodist Church of England, can in fact be considered a community on the strength of its users' relationships, their sense of belonging and their support, while the face-to-face meetings – which indeed do occur – did not play an essential role in that regard (ibid., p. 160–1).

Finally, others scholars propose concepts different from 'community' altogether. Lundby, in discussing Dawson's approach, votes for the concept of 'belonging' instead of 'community' to better grasp the developments online as well as the connections between online and offline (Lundby 2011, p. 1219). Additionally, he finds it more promising to look for "specific processes of identification and interaction" than to try "to capture a community in its entirety" (ibid., p. 1221). Finally, he points out that religion online does not necessarily need a base in "such strictly defined 'virtual communities'" as Dawson is searching for (ibid., p. 1231).

To put it briefly, we find diverging views regarding whether community or network – or even belonging, as Lundby argues – might be the right analytical concept. This may be due to a number of factors. First, findings indicate that the specific media form within the online context is decisive: while purely interactional platforms such as discussion boards may be more suited to enabling a community of users, blogs may provide only sparse interactions and thereby lead to networks rather than communities (Teusner 2011). Websites, in contrast, may offer a broad range of options, including possibilities of interaction (Foltz & Foltz 2003). Another important factor to consider is whether the research focus is on the online platforms' possibilities, the actual use, or the users' interpretation of it. We may find platforms suited for the emergence of communities that are not used in that way; conversely, a platform may not be suited for the emergence of a community, but users may feel that they are part of a community nevertheless. Finally, and most important for my purposes here, the definitions of community – and alternative concepts – are crucial to determining which aspects are decisive for detecting religious community online: can a community take the form of a network, or are the two terms mutually exclusive; in other words, do the concepts describe different social forms? While many approaches seem to understand 'network' as a subtype of 'community' (Campbell 2005, pp. 36–9), I understand the two as distinct concepts. Community refers to a social entity that can be emotionally or symbolically charged and is perceived as such by its members. In contrast, the term 'network' as I understand it rather describes certain ties – that is,

relations between people, whether strong or weak (see, e.g., Granovetter 1973; Stegbauer 2008) – which may be emotionally charged as discrete relationships, but are not interpreted by its members as a community with shared norms or goals.[6]

My own field of research is Web-based Christian discussion boards in the German language. In contrast to research which emphasizes the increasing importance of network approaches for researching online social forms, my empirical data indicate that this field can be grasped well in terms of online religious communities.

4 "…Just Like Between Siblings": Users' Perspectives on Online Communities

In the following I will refer to data from an empirical research project, conducted between 2010 and 2014, that focused on the users of Web-based Christian discussion boards in the German language and based in Germany, Austria or Switzerland. The boards were nominally dedicated to either the Catholic Church or a Protestant denomination, but in fact exhibited a broad range of internal variation in their religious orientation. They were hosted by private persons, small associations or church-related enterprises (e.g., publishing houses), but not by the nationally recognized churches. The vast majority of boards are visible to everyone, but registration is often required in order to take part in the online discussions. Their content is pre-structured in several thematic subsections, with at least one devoted to religion-related matters and one to non-religion-related discussions. In most cases, however, one will find a far more differentiated structure. Within these subsections, the threads are listed based on the time of their most recent post.

Within the research project as a whole, I analyzed the boards' technical and media characteristics, especially with regard to modes of participation and their appropriation. A random sample of threads was also analyzed. But in keeping with the theoretical approaches outlined above, I argue that it is crucial to take the users' perspectives into account when focusing on the question of online religious communities. Do they feel they share norms and values, a common history and common goals with their fellow users? Do they feel like they are part of a community online? To what degree, according to the users, are these communities promoted or restrained by the boards' media characteristics? And what importance do these communities have for the overall religious activities and embedding of the boards' users, especially in comparison to their offline affiliations?

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[6]   I have elaborated on this elsewhere (see Neumaier 2016, 240–264).

The data used in the following are basically twofold: the first set consists of a quantitative survey with 842 participants,[7] among whom 450 used Web-based discussion boards at least frequently and answered the question set on online community and, therefore, serve as the sample for the purposes of this article. Qualitative interviews with 34 of the users comprise the second data set. These interviews were conducted, transcribed and analyzed in accordance with grounded theory and its respective three-step coding procedure (see Strauss & Corbin 1996). The survey questionnaire as well as the interviews focused on several topics of Internet use for religious purposes, including the users' perception of whether an online community existed on the discussion boards they frequently visited, how it could be characterized, and how important it was for their online use. Regarding the interviews, the analysis was not limited to the parts specifically asking about friendships and communities online, but included the entire interviews, especially with respect to questions of social forms.

4.1 Findings from the quantitative survey

Within the quantitative survey, two sections of items seem to be relevant for these investigations: contacts to other users, on the one hand, and attitudes toward friendship and online communities on the other. Regarding contacts to other users, survey participants were asked to describe the frequency of interaction with other users outside the online discussion board.

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[7]   It is important to note that the participants were self-selected, so the findings have to be interpreted with caution and can only give a preliminary insight into the overall field of discussion board users.
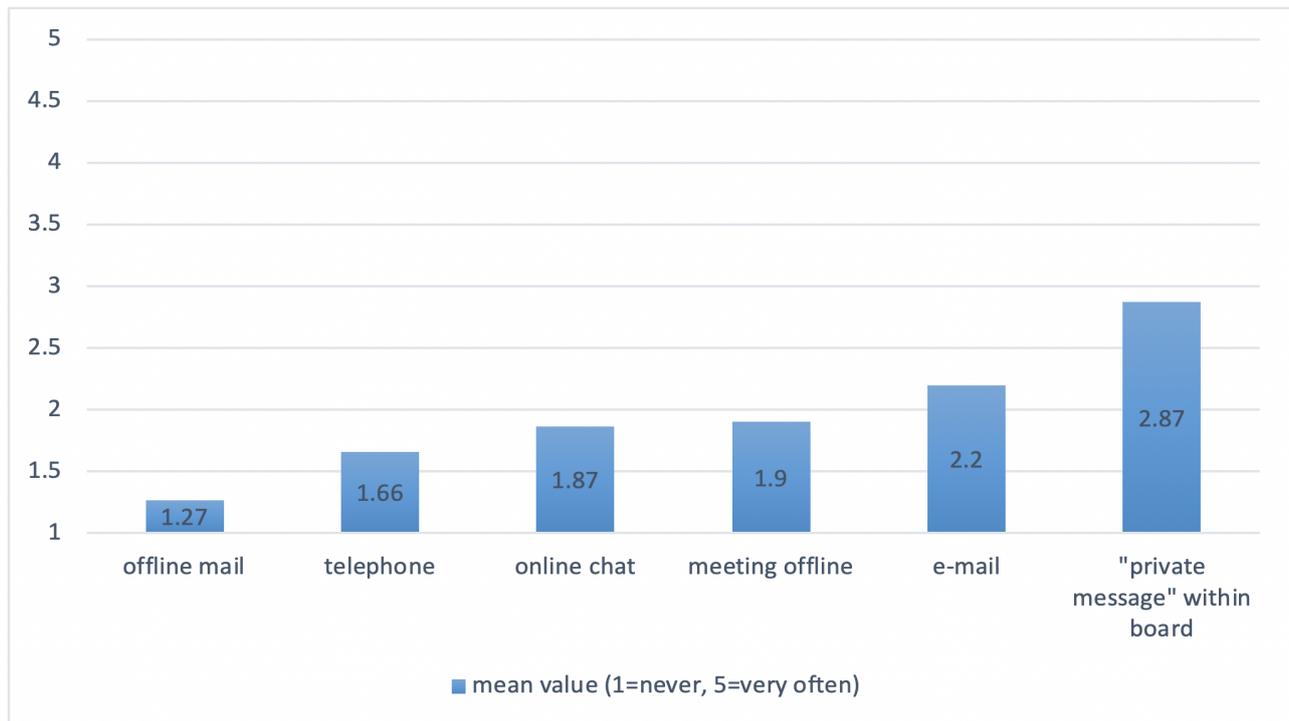
Figure 1: Frequency of Interaction with Other Users Outside the Board Itself

On a scale from 1 (never) to 5 (very often), 28% indicate that they had contact via private message often or very often, and another 37% at least occasionally (see also overall mean values in fig. 1). When it comes to e-mail or chat, 12% and 14%, respectively, communicated in this way very often or often, and another 27% and 11%, respectively, did so occasionally. Regarding non-digital means of communication with people met online, 7% have telephoned or met one another personally very often or often, while 13% percent have occasionally telephoned and 20% have met each other occasionally. Used least are traditional letters: 2% have written to other users often or very often, 5% occasionally.

On the basis of these results, we can distinguish modes of contact that stay within the realm of digital media and those that reach beyond. One might expect that the migration of interaction to other digital ways of communication would be closer at hand, and indeed 65% use the private messaging function within the board itself, and nearly 40 percent e-mail at least occasionally. On the other hand, people very rarely communicate via posted letters, which is most likely part of the general trend of decreasing importance of posted letters for frequent and everyday personal contact. Reflecting a similar trend, telephone calls are the second least popular mode of interaction outside the board itself. This indeed seems to indicate a descending order of mediated contact, ranging from staying within digital media to migrating to 'offline communication'. However, there is a striking

counterexample: 27% have met other users in person at least occasionally, while slightly fewer users (25%) join in Web-based chat rooms also occasionally. While both modes of communication foster simultaneous and direct exchange, face-to-face meetings still seem to be more popular or – more precisely and probably even more surprisingly – are more often realized. Obviously, people are willing to accept the additional costs of leaving the digital environment, and they quite clearly seem to prefer personal meetings to other, non-personal ways of communicating offline. Face-to-face meetings therefore still appear to be highly attractive and are comparatively more frequently enacted.

Personal relationships are one aspect – and sometimes an integral part – of community building in online environments, as they can be the basis for stable and long-lasting bonds. In some of the classical conceptions, they even count as a necessary condition. On the other hand, they are hardly sufficient conditions, neither in classical nor in modern approaches to community. This is especially true if, as researchers, we adhere to approaches like that of 'symbolic communities', in which case we have to take individual perspectives and attitudes on the particular social form into account. To do so, another set of quantitative data derived from the survey can give further insight, as it specifically asked for the users' perception of community. The survey items were derived from a model of community elaborated in an earlier work (see Neumaier 2016, 248–52). The model consists of different dimensions of community as outlined above – locality, mutual interaction and a feeling of belonging together – all of which are crucial categories within existing theoretical concepts of community. The respective survey items can be related to these dimensions and test different aspects and intensities of the items. Besides asking to what degree the discussion board is perceived as a familiar locality and the frequency of helping one another, several survey items are directed at a shared sense of trust, sympathy and commonality, specifically asking about the following: a shared history, insider knowledge, a sense of community, established friendships, shared opinions, the feeling of being understood online (better than offline), a feeling of honesty toward each other, a shared dedication to common goals, basically liking the other users, looking forward to being online, being emotionally involved in other users' stories, having taken part in conflictual debating, planning to use the forum for a long time, and the urge to notify the other users if one is going to be absent for a long period of time (see fig. 2).
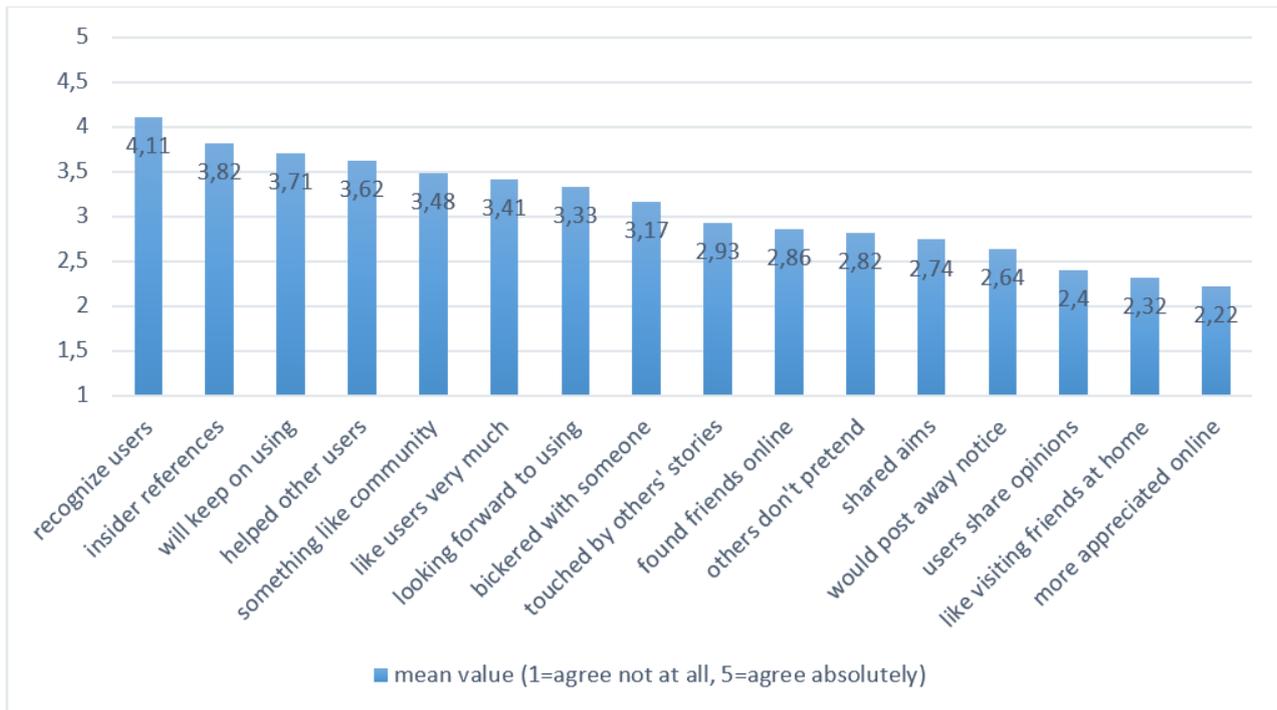
Figure 2: Agreement with Dimensions of Community in Online Discussion Board Use

The answers show that the highest (arithmetic) average by far (4.11 of 5) is achieved in the item "I 'recognize' other users, e.g., I remember their stories and/or know their opinions." This indicates that users see their fellow users as individual with attitudes and a history, and can relate these aspects to those specific persons, probably by remembering their nicknames or avatars. Other items with a high average point to an (actual or planned) long-lasting activity online: people anticipate continuing to use the online board into the distant future (3.71) and indicate that they have 'insider knowledge' (3.82), which is only gained by frequent participation. Perhaps surprisingly, the statement "I have already helped other users" generates the next highest value. It is not specified whether this refers to giving advice, praying for each other, donating money to users or their parishes in need, or engaging in offline activities, but as the online observations show, all of these activities have indeed occurred within an online board. The mean value of 3.62 is clearly above average here, and only 7% of users state that they have never helped their fellow users in any way. The survey items with the lowest agreement rating were those referring to shared opinions and goals (2.40, 2.74) and the feeling of being understood better online than offline (2.22). This may be interpreted as indicative of a sense of belonging together, which derives more from a shared (communicative) history and mutual support than from shared convictions, be they religious or otherwise. The conclusion is somewhat counterintuitive: knowing and helping one another and being together for a long time, but not necessarily sharing opinions and values, are characteristics of

classic forms of community such as the *Dorfgemeinschaft* mentioned above, which is based on long-standing forms of living together. However, this pattern certainly does not hold for those forms of community that coalesce around the individual choices of groups of like-minded people, such as translocal, temporary communities and especially, as one might expect, religious communities.

In this context it should also be pointed out that the means are remarkably high (none lower than 2.22/5), and – with three exceptions – fewer than a quarter of the participants stated that these statements were not true for them at all. Despite the Internet often being seen as an impersonal medium and therefore suitable for creating networks but not for the emergence of communities, the respondents clearly feel connected in one way or another.

4.2 Findings from the qualitative interviews

The analysis of the quantitative data also prompts some crucial questions: What broader picture can be painted of online religious communities based on the survey data? What is the significance of the relationships between individual users with regard to community? And what role does religion play as a factor in the development of a community? We addressed these questions with qualitative interviews, asking the interviewees, among other questions, whether they perceived something comparable to a community on their preferred religious Web board. The analyses of their elaborations led to three types of perceived community, which will be presented in the following. Their original German names consist of *in vivo* codes, that is, keywords which originated in the interviews and were identified as particularly appropriate or relevant by the interviewer. Translated into English, the three types can be referred to as 'siblings in faith', 'board family' and 'combat zone'.

The first type, 'siblings in faith', is characterized by harmonious interactions, shared religious beliefs, and mutual support and encouragement in faith-related issues. Moritz tells me with regard to the mutual support he experienced and observed online:

> Oh yes, there are really those people with unfortunate fates […] who also need the support of brothers and sisters, and in this regard I think – well, I appreciate it very much, because I think [the website] as a whole is AMAZINGLY respectable. (Moritz)[8]

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[8]   All given names are pseudonyms chosen by the author of the study. Quotes have been translated from the German and have been rendered as verbatim as possible, with only small interjections of the interviewer (such as 'yes' or 'mh') being deleted. For the purpose of this article, transcription signs were reduced as much as possible. Still included are capital letters for strongly emphasized words and dashes if the speaker stopped him- or herself in the middle of a thought and started again in a different way.

Being able to help one another through actions and spiritual support is one of the main advantages of using the online board, and the users very much appreciate it for this. Additionally, even though Moritz himself is not a Christian, he naturally refers to the other users as 'brothers and sisters' in the Christian sense of the term. Christianity here serves as an overarching reference to which everybody can and does relate as a basis for relationships and support.

With regard to the 'siblings in faith', the board users can be characterized by numerous individual relationships, but this in and of itself does not form a community. The users do not refer to a community of board users, but understand the individual relationships as well as the board itself as being only part of a larger religious community, that is, the Christian community. This understanding not only proves to be a common concept in many religious traditions, including Christian ones, but regarding theories of communities, it also clearly reminds one of Anderson's 'imagined communities'. In both cases, people feel that they are a small part of a greater whole, even though they do not – and never will – know all other members of the respective community.

The second type, the 'board family', shares the principle of generally harmonious interactions. Unlike the 'siblings of faith', however, these interactions can be a bit more discussion oriented, as people in those communities are more heterogeneous regarding their worldviews and religious orientations. They understand themselves more as a family, which, in their eyes, includes cohesion in the face of external attacks, but with a bit of internal quarrelling as well.

> And I think it's a nice thing that you recognize, if [there are] two of them who actually have totally contrasting worldviews and actually can't get along with each other, if then a new user enters the board and insults one of them [narrates an example], the users who normally fight with each other then join forces against the other, eh? According to the rule "I'm allowed to do that, I may [laughs], I may give him a hard time, but if somebody external is approaching […], we stick together somehow!" (Sarah)

Users characterize this kind of community as a family precisely for this reason:

> And then, with [the board], well, there they find some like-minded people, at least in parts that's always the case. And there are these opposing views, and most people handle that very well, I think. That you argue with each other, well, OK, I mean I have a family, that's just like between siblings. (Cornelia)

Therefore, the basis for perceiving themselves as a community in this case does not lie in an overall feeling of being like-minded, and it does not refer to an overarching imagined community of shared norms and attitudes. Rather, the self-conception as a community is mainly based on a shared history of users and their interactions on the Internet board. Consequently, and in contrast to the 'siblings in

faith', the community in this case can be seen in the online board itself and its users. There is no reference to greater entities (e.g., a global religious community), or at least this does not appear to be important for the users' perception of this community. This, ultimately, resembles quite traditional concepts of community, in particular those that are based on long-lasting cohabitation, be it because of kinship or because of residential proximity.

The third type is, in a nutshell, the 'combat zone'. Using online boards in this case serves the purpose of discussing religion in depth and on an intellectual level regarding, for example, theological, juridical or philosophical questions related to religion. This is not to suggest that the respective users are critical of or antagonistic toward religion in general; in fact, they are often profoundly religious, but their personal religiosity is not at the core of their online use. Rather, they are looking for what they would describe as a highly sophisticated conversation about the backgrounds and contexts of their personal beliefs. They want to improve their knowledge of religion, and therefore are looking not for harmonious contacts, but for thoughtful, skilled conversationalists.

> If incorrect or unproven statements are posted online, what I like very much on [the board] is that then immediately a lot of further questions are asked, and proof is called for, or counterstatements are given, very elaborated, eh. Thus, I also had to – it's always a bit EMBARRASSING, but also instructive, if you yourself in a discussion present as a fact something that you just know from hearsay, and then you get it back, slapped in your face, because in fact, it's not true, or only half – well, one has learned something, hasn't one? (Johannes)

While the metaphor of the 'combat zone' is quite conflict-oriented (and other users refer to metaphors of physical fighting), yet others refer to metaphors from the field of gaming (e.g., chess) and other more playful ways of competing.

This description may not immediately evoke associations of community. Nonetheless, users not only appreciate their fellow users and the online board as a whole and rely on it for reasons of personal development, but they also have respect and sympathy for their conversation partners online and get to know their stories, attitudes and backgrounds very well. Herbert, an atheist user of a Catholic board, tells me:

> The interesting people were the ones engaged in church or religiously, on the one hand, because one could argue with them, and on the other hand, because I realized very quickly that they are not fools. […] Well, people with good arguments with, with interesting thoughts – and that is, what, what I realized at this moment, what actually shapes my existence on the board: I am there to learn. (Herbert)

These 'combat zones' and 'chess players' therefore form a kind of community as the term is defined by most of the current approaches for the present times (e.g., Hitzler, 2008). They make a fluid, temporal community whose members gather for a specific purpose. This purpose may be primarily self-centered (in this case: debate with other users in order to be entertained, improve individual knowledge, and eventually become an increasingly independent believer), but for the time being, quite a stable community emerges around these needs.[9]

With regard to the three sets of characteristics developed earlier, it is finally important to mention that there is evidence of qualities from all three categories of components of a community. The action-related components can be found easily: users not only give answers and advice, but also contact one another if they feel that someone's posts sound desperate and pray for each other or donate money in times of need. Some become godparents for other users' children, and there have even been marriages that started on the discussion board. These aspects can be found in all of the three types mentioned above, although they may be more common within the 'siblings of faith' and the 'board family'.

Idea-related properties can be found as well. As some quotes have already shown, users share norms and values, and indicate the borders of a community. With regard to the three types of community depicted above, though, these norms, borders, shared ideas, and so forth refer to different entities, depending on a) whether the community's border is congruent with the board itself and b) the significance of religion for the formation of the community. Thus, they can refer to an overarching religious community, as is the case with the 'siblings in faith', or to the board itself, as in the case of the 'board family'.

Within the online context, the physical properties of a community may be most at stake, but several aspects from the findings would appear to offset this danger and therefore are worth mentioning here. First, there are in fact offline meetings of board users of several boards, which in some cases even take place regularly and/or extend over several days. While these are only attended by a core group of users, they can still lead to a general feeling of community among a larger group of users. Second, users interpret the board in terms of a physical place with spatial properties. Terms like 'going online', 'arriving at the board', and 'being present at the board' point to this understanding. Drawing on spatial approaches (e.g., Löw 2001), it can be argued that these interpretations are essential for understanding the spatial qualities of a place (Löw 2001; see also

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9   From a religious studies point of view, there is a certain correlation of community type with the users' religious affiliation that may be of interest. Based on an analysis of the boards' topics as well as the styles of communication, it is mainly Catholic, male-dominated boards that show characteristics of the 'combat zone' type of community, while the Protestant and Evangelical boards tend to show signs of the first two types. As I have elaborated elsewhere (Neumaier 2016), this – perhaps unexpected – correlation can be explained if we look at the role of the boards in relation to their users' offline affiliations and the specific motives for board use that go along with those affiliations.

Neumaier 2016b). Finally, not unlike other places of religion-related gathering (e.g., parish halls), discussion boards are experienced as reliable places for meeting people, with stable properties for interaction and communication, which again converges with Löw's theoretical considerations.

5 Conclusion and Discussion

In sum, the quantitative survey shows, on the one hand, the emergence of social relations on Christian Web boards. On the other hand, it depicts a very classical type of local community which is based on a shared history and mutual support, and less on shared worldviews and values. The qualitative research extends and elaborates these findings into three types of community that differ in the degree of harmonious or conflict-oriented interaction, the point of reference for the perceived community, and the role of religion in it. This allows further conclusions to be drawn.

First, it became clear that even in the context of one specific media platform – in this case, online discussion boards – different kinds of communities emerge. Some of them resemble rather classical types similar to those depicted by Tönnies and Weber, while others mirror more contemporary developments. And although the latter may in fact be communities of choice as opposed to communities of birth (i.e., being born into a certain family or village in the nineteenth century), and can be left if users feel the urge to do so, they do not resemble Hepp's or Hitzler's posttraditional or deterritorial communities in general. Examples from the interviews show that at least a core group of users takes part in an online board over years, and that their perception of experiencing a community can be rooted in a long, shared history and in knowing the background stories of other users. This also indicates that while online communities are obviously not detached from broader trends in society, their emergence does not necessarily result in the general replacement of older forms of communities; in fact, the online communities may actually emulate and perpetuate the older forms. Second, it has to be noted that all these kinds of communities share basic components that sociologists would identify as properties of a community. They may play out in different ways, but nonetheless characterize every type elaborated above.

Both aspects underline the fact that there is no unidirectional or even teleological development within the field of online religious social forms. Online platforms like Web boards may lead to the emergence of networks, but they certainly also allow communities to form. Regarding the actual type of community, the needs and interests of users are decisive; users establish or find a respective community arising from the opportunities that social media provide. Finally, the emerging communities prove that Web boards are able to substitute for a feature of offline religions that is important to many of the Christian users.

Some limitations still have to be addressed. In this study, only users of Web boards were taken into account. It seems likely that research on platforms with other media characteristics (e.g., less text-based ones, or those with more fluid user groups) may lead to quite different findings. Also, I included a discussion of neither the platforms themselves nor the users' actual use of them. Based on my theoretical considerations, I have instead focused on the users' interpretations regarding whether they experienced a community or not. I might add, though, that in the larger context of the study I also visited the boards regularly and analyzed their media characteristics as well as styles of use. These analyses point to a convergence of the users' experiences and actual modes of communication and interaction within the specific boards they approach. However, these findings, as well as the relation of online communities to the users' offline affiliations, are discussed elsewhere (Neumaier 2016).

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Biography

Dr. ANNA NEUMAIER is a postdoctoral researcher at the Institute for Religious Studies at the University of Bremen, Germany. Her PhD thesis (published 2014) investigated the conditions, modes and consequences of religious Internet use among Christians from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. Her areas of research and teaching are transformations of contemporary religion and religiosity, with a particular focus on religion and new media, religious community, religious authority, theories of secularization and religious pluralization, interreligious dialogue and qualitative research on religion.

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Multisite Churches

Creating Community from the Offline to the Online

Alessandra Vitullo

Abstract

This article – framed within digital religion studies – analyzes the online religious activities of a non-denominational Christian multisite church, LifePoint Church (LPC). A multisite church is a church with a central location that serves as a hub or production center for the church's activities and service contents, which are distributed to multiple sites in different locations through video or webcasts. LPC is an international multisite church: it has five campuses: three in the United States, one in Bangkok, and another one in Brussels. The LPC Brussels campus serves as a case study to observe how communication technologies, in particular the Internet, are adopted by both pastors and members to recreate the same 'sacramental environment' across the five churches. Through online observation, interviews, and questionnaires, this research reveals two different usages of the Internet made by LPC. One usage is public, official, informative and formal, and is promoted by the Church's leadership; the other is unofficial and is characterized by private and intimate communication among the Church's members. The article will analyze in depth how the congregants create this informal communication, which intensifies group solidarity, members' virtual religious practice, and group identity.

Keywords

Digital religion; Multisite church; Christianity; Internet; Virtual communities

1 Introduction

In today's cities, traditional sacred places still exist: cathedrals, churches, synagogues and mosques are integral parts of the urban landscape. The novelty lies in the other forms of 'postsecular

sanctuaries' (Rosati 2012)[1] in which it is possible to create religious and transcendental experiences in a not strictly traditional way. Taking into account the approach put forward by Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life,* places *become* sacred as a consequence of human praxis of consecration, such as the output of ritual and its work in specific historical circumstances. In this perspective, nothing intrinsically sacred exists; places are *rendered* sacred by human acts of sanctification or, more accurately, by ritual acts of consecration (Smith 1987).

This article analyzes how a religious community can delimit and identify a sacred space within a virtual environment, and how the Internet can be a place where people can practice their religious values, join their religious community, and experience the transcendence.

Supported by the theoretical and methodological approaches developed by Campbell (2005, 2010), I highlight how the members of a multisite church, LifePoint Church (LPC), active on three continents, can modulate their use of the Internet in various ways to create their communal sacred place. With a special focus on the campus in Brussels, the article compares the official communication on LPC's website with the unofficial religious communication that occurs among members in private Facebook groups. Finally, these multipurpose usages of the Internet will question the definition of the Internet as a 'sacramental' space, as developed by Campbell (2005).

2 Theoretical Framework

Over the past thirty years, scholars have investigated religious groups and their activities on the Internet, observing which aspects of traditional religious practices can be translated online and how new digital technologies can reshape and influence religious communication and behaviors. This new interdisciplinary field of study – coined 'digital religion' – aims to analyze how religious practices, discourses, and engagement are embedded and interconnected in online and offline contexts.

As Campbell and Vitullo (2016) demonstrate, the initial research within this paradigm can be understood as the descriptive stage on which scholars documented and examined different groups as online religious communities (O'Leary & Brasher 1996). In stage two, scholars moved to the

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[1]   Rosati (2012) introduces the notion of 'postsecular sanctuary' to indicate conventional and non-conventional sacred places in our contemporary social landscape, such as civil mausoleums, monuments to leaders of the nation, memorials to the victims of wars, and those commemorating fundamental moments in the life of a community. These places usually function as sacred places and often satisfy nearly all the criteria that make a space a sacred place, with the only exception being that they do not reflect a transcendent dimension. All these sanctuaries, be they religious-traditional or civic-political, are part of the modern landscape, and they make possible the experience of profound power that transcends the self and places the individual in relation to ultimate aims.

categorization of these groups by identifying common characteristics regarding how community was performed and how members functioned online (Hadden & Cowan 2000). Then, in the third stage, scholars began to recognize that offline religious communities were using digital platforms and technologies to serve their members and enhance their ministry work (Dawson & Cowan 2004). Current research tends to concentrate on the intersection of religious communities' online and offline practices and discourses (Campbell 2010; Cheong & Poon 2009; Noomen et al. 2011).

Following the evolution of this field of study, Campbell formulated a theoretical and methodological approach that provides a useful heuristic instrument to further analyze the interaction of religion, media, and community. First, it offers a theoretical definition of the Internet *as a sacramental space* (Campbell 2005). The Internet is conceptualized as an environment in which certain practices can be carried out, be they individual (i.e., connecting a person with a larger community of shared faith online), communal (i.e., affirming or building communal religious identity and cohesion), or informational (i.e., seeking specific religious information or utilities). For my empirical analysis, I will consider only a part of this definition, namely that which recognizes some virtual environments as spaces set apart for religious practice (i.e., to pray, to share religious communication and values). This conceptualization is an effort to adapt Durkheim's definition of the social construction and function of sacred spaces (2013 [1912]) to the timeless and spaceless nature of virtual realities.

Rosati (2015) argues that in postsecular societies, religions can manifest themselves in new sacred places and in unusual forms and *sanctuaries* (Rosati 2012), while maintaining one and the same 'elementary grammar'. Following Rosati's understanding, sacred places have specific functional properties that can be viewed as a stable grammar: 1) they orient congregants by mirroring or representing on earth a more perfect and ultimate realm conceived of as lying beyond the terrestrial domain; 2) they reflect or evoke a natural divinity, immanent or transcendent, thereby providing a symbolic reference to something more and something desirable; 3) they are a point of encounter between the mundane and the transcendent orders; and 4) they manifest the presence of a cult object, image or idol that symbolizes and embodies the divine presence at the sacred place. Certain places become sacred in specific historical circumstances as a consequence of human practices of consecration. This consecration separates these places from other spaces of daily life, giving them a characteristic 'atmosphere' that is perceived as soon as the threshold between the

mundane and the sacred is crossed.[2] It is up to empirical research to establish whether the 'traditional grammar of sacred places' still works for new forms of postsecular sanctuaries:

> Daily religious practice in postsecular cities can 'take place in quite unexpected' places, and the task of research is to investigate the logic of these new places and their related practices: domestic altars and televised liturgies, faith-based organizations and chat rooms on the Internet, 'invented religions' […], on-line religion […], multi-faith and meditation halls […]. Are all these phenomena changing the grammar of sacred places? Can a sacred place exist in *cyber space*? (Rosati 2015, p. 66; emphasis in original)

As Campbell (2005) observes, using the Internet as a 'sacramental space' can foster a number of effects. Religious groups can reinforce their identity or a particular set of beliefs or rituals. Members can build their group's narrative by encouraging one another in their shared convictions and through supportive discussions. Such network-supporting narratives allow members to see online communities as places where people with similar experiences will be accepted and where care will be provided for members in ways unavailable to them offline. These communities use the Internet as a support structure, facilitating their personal and spiritual growth.

Drawing on Campbell's insights, this contribution investigates how users consider the Internet as a place consecrated for ritual and religious practices. To this end, it provides a concrete example of how the 'atmosphere' and 'threshold', to use Rosati's terms (2015), are created virtually by religious groups online to foster new forms of spiritual networking and practices. Furthermore, the methodological approach formulated by Campbell (2010) – the Religious Social Shaping of Technology (RSST) – is fruitfully used for the analysis of the social construction of these virtual sacramental spaces. By applying the RSST approach, it becomes possible to examine how religious groups negotiate the boundaries of sacred spaces in the experience of moving between offline and online settings for religious practices.

RSST arises from the Social Shaping of Technology theory (MacKenzie & Wajcman 1985), which frames technology as a social process. According to this approach it is not the character of a particular technology that determines its use and the outcome of its use (Ellul 1964). Rather, social groups can shape technologies to suit their purposes. Campbell (2010) points out that, unlike SST, RSST gives an account of the specific conditions that occur when technology is used according to

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[2]   Thresholds, gates and doors, as well as columns and pillars, are key examples of symbolic links between the sacred and the mundane. The need to pass through a threshold to reach a sacred place endows that place with its own characteristic 'atmosphere'. Griffero (2010) highlights how the concept of atmosphere – which penetrates our social life far beyond the climatic dimension – refers to emotional spaces that have a transcendent power, that are not merely external subjective projections of inner sentiments, but are, rather, semi-things, having, in Durkheimian terms, a sui generis nature.

religious values and aims. The strength of the SST approach resides in the fact that it goes beyond the social determinism that sees technology as a supra-individual force determining human action (Aupers & Houtman 2010). Similarly, RSST suggests that a technology is shaped by the setting in which it is introduced and by the agents who utilize it. The community, in turn, is changed through the adoption of a new technology. Thus, users tame technologies in ways that enable them to fit more neatly into the routine of daily life; in other words, they engage in a process of 'domestication' of these technologies, trying to make them fit with "the moral economy of the household" (Silverstone, Hirsch & Morley 1992).

In this case 'moral economy' is used to describe the intersection of moral beliefs and economic practices. Therefore, domesticating a technology means making choices about the meaning and practical benefits of using that technology within a space connoted by symbolic and transcendental values:

> By members choosing to come together into a shared space, be it physical or ideological space, they create a moral economy that requires them to make common judgment about the technologies they will appropriate or reject and rules of interaction with these, transferring symbolic meaning onto these choices. (Campbell 2010, p. 58)

Observing virtual religious communities through RSST's lens allows scholars to focus on how religious practices can be adapted to new technologies, examine how religious meanings can be translated in a digital language, and analyze how technological and theological decision-making processes are involved in a religious group's efforts to construct its narrative and identity.

Having clarified the methodological and theoretical approach, it is now possible to proceed with the analysis of the new virtual religious environment introduced in this article: multisite churches.

3 LifePoint Church: Defining a Multisite Church, Redefining a Sacramental Space

As Campbell and DeLashmutt (2013) explain, a multisite church is a church with a central location that serves as a hub or production center for the church's activities and service contents, which are distributed to multiple sites in different locations through video or webcasts. As such, the church forms a network of congregations that aims to replicate the worship experience of the home church, combining video, live worship, and/or interaction with service facilitators. Because multisite churches are often enterprises driven by and dependent on technology, they raise interesting

questions about how technology can transform religious practices and how technology can be shaped by users to pursue religious values. The following discussion draws on a specific case study, LifePoint Church (LPC), a special model of multisite church whose campuses are located on three different continents (North America, Europa and Asia).

LPC was founded at the beginning of the twentieth century in Smyrna, Tennessee, under the name The First Baptist Church of Smyrna. Over the years, the church progressively grew in size, and larger facilities were needed to accommodate the increasing number of congregants. In 2000, instead of building a bigger church, the senior pastor decided to convert it into a multisite church.

The idea of establishing international campuses was rooted in LifePoint's missionary goal of multiplying churches in 'post-Christian' or 'non-Christian' countries, attracting secularized younger generations and educating them to be new missionaries around the world (Hood 2013). Currently LPC has five campuses: the central church in Smyrna; two more nearby in Tennessee; and two abroad: one in Bangkok and one in Brussels.

For my research I have chosen the Brussels campus as the lens through which to study how the Internet influences the religious identity of a church's members by creating a narrative that portrays a cohesive online–offline international community. LifePoint Church Brussels (LPCB) was planted in 2012 by a pastor from Smyrna. The campus is located in the eastern suburbs of Brussels, on the fourth floor of a building used for commercial activities, so the church is unrecognizable from the outside. The lack of a denomination, recognizable sacramental symbols, and specific rituals is a predominant characteristic of these new models of church. The lack of clear religious references apparently allows them to attract people from heterogeneous religious backgrounds. Moreover, their intensive engagement with new technologies appeals to younger generations (Greenblatt & Powell 2007).

4 Methodology

The choice to investigate in detail the international campus in Brussels arose from the assumption that the great distance between the campus and the central church would require extensive use of media technology to construct a shared virtual sacramental space. All information about LPCB was collected during a year of regular visits to the community. The ethnographic work used participant observation to examine the community's worship activities and provide the data for a qualitative-interpretive analysis of LPCB religious life (Tracy 2013). Unstructured interviews were conducted with the senior pastor Pat Hood and with the pastor of the Brussels campus, Len Phegley.

Moreover, I undertook a two-year-long observation (from 2014 to 2016) of the LPC's online activities, observing official communication and members' interaction on LPC's websites and social networks – especially on Facebook and Twitter. To better understand how members of LPC use and consume the Church's online religious communication and to effectively analyze the LPC virtual religious experience, quantitative data were collected through questionnaires submitted to members of the Brussels campus. The survey sought to highlight the religious, biographical, and cultural backgrounds of the members and their Internet usage related to the activities of the Church.

5 LPC Official and Public Communication Online: Centralizing Authority

The interview with the senior pastor reveals how the central church in Smyrna plays a role in controlling and coordinating all of LPCB's activities, from selecting pastors for the campuses to choosing the Sunday sermons to deciding which songs are to be played during the services. Pastor Hood coordinates LPCB's activities through e-mail, video conferencing, and occasional visits to the Brussels campus.

The same centralized structure is also immediately apparent when observing the Church's presence online. Indeed, the homepage of LPC in Smyrna is the exclusive platform via which the user is redirected to the webpages of the other campuses. The structure and graphic design of all webpages are administered by one webmaster from Smyrna, and the Smyrna webpage is the most complete and updated of all of them. This is the only church offering streaming services, recorded services, podcasts of sermons, and e-Bible readings. The YouTube channel is the same for all campuses, but the majority of the videos are recorded at the church in Smyrna.

However, social media communication allows campuses to be more autonomous in the articulation of their online presence. Each campus can freely administer its social media profile,[3] but still maintains a uniform design. Throughout 2015 I observed the online interaction among Church members on two of the most popular social networks, Facebook and Twitter. The intensity of the interaction was measured in terms of the number of subscribers of the social pages, the quantity and quality of the content documented on these pages (e.g., how many 'status' or 'tweets'

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[3]   The official LPC Smyrna Facebook page was obviously the first one to be opened (in 2009), and it has the most subscribers (more than 5,000). Four more pages have been created in the following years: LifePoint Church, Stewarts Creek Campus (c. 800 subscribers); LifePoint Church Brussels (c. 1,000 subscribers); LifePoint Church Bangkok Campus (c. 800 subscribers); and LifePoint Church Murfreesboro Campus (c. 300 subscribers). Each campus also has a Twitter and an Instagram account.

are posted every day), and the feedback received from these activities, i.e., the 'likes' and comments on Facebook and the 'retweets' and 'preferences' on Twitter.[4]

As observed for the website as well as for social media, LPC's communication is still focused on the promotion of the pastoral activities of the Church, reinforcing the narrative of the centrality and diffused presence of the Smyrna church. The effort to maintain an official and institutional presence of LPC online is confirmed by the words of the senior pastor himself:

> The website is the key to getting the world – marketing if you want – but the Internet should not be a substitute, because when you become a Christian you are part of a community and to be part of a community means to have a life together. The Internet, however, is isolation and not direct involvement with people. You just stand there looking at your screen. The Internet should not be a substitute, but a supplement.

Cross referencing data collected during the online observation with the outcome of the questionnaires can help to better understand what religious use the members make of this official and formal communication online – especially members located at a great distance, such as those at the Brussels campus.

To interpret these results it is important to know that half of the LPCB members interviewed[5] arrive at the Church after looking for a church online, for example by typing into Google "English-speaking church". The percentage of people who heard about the existence of LPCB online is about the same as the percentage of people who came thanks to word of mouth among familiars and friends. This suggests that, because of the campus's recent foundation and lack of visibility, its online presence is an essential tool for supporting and promoting its very existence. Moreover, on the campus there are thirteen different nationalities and eight different Christian denominations.[6] More than half of the respondents are young adults between the ages of 18 and 30, so the majority of the members are young people, who are usually familiar with new technologies. Generally speaking, one can say that the Internet turns out to be an important gateway to the campus,

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[4]　For example, the Smyrna Facebook page has more than 5,000 members and the administrators publish an average of three posts per day. The feedback received by these posts ranges from 3 to 80 likes per post, and the comments are rarely more than 3. On the branch campuses' Facebook pages, the volume of interactions and posts is even less, which is in part due to the smaller number of subscribers.

[5]　Of an average of 60 people who attend the church, 37 responded at the questionnaire.

[6]　According to the results of the survey, 32.4% of the attendees come from the United States, 13.5% are from Belgium, 8.1% are from United Kingdom, and the remaining 46% comprises 13 different nationalities. Participants belong to 8 different Christian denominations (8 people have defined themselves as non-denominational Christians; 6 referred to themselves generically as Protestants; 6 people identified as Baptist; 4 as Presbyterians; 1 each as Lutheran, Methodist, and from the Free Church of Scotland; 3 as Catholics; 2 as Orthodox; and finally, 3 people claimed not to have had a religious 'background' before approaching LPCB).

attracting a young, heterogeneous religious community that is not rooted in a specific cultural or geographical context.

The analysis of the questions concerning the LPCB members' online religious activities shows that 75.6% of respondents claimed to visit the website, but only 29.7% of them indicate doing so at least once a week (the rest of the participants indicate a lower frequency). Moreover, only 17.2% of the website users affirmed that they find online all they need for their religious experience, while 58.8% of the members said they need physical participation in the Church's religious activities. Regarding social networks, 45.9% are regular social media users and follow LPC's activities as part of their regular social media use, while 37.8% use social media exclusively to stay updated about Church events. The rest of the members subscribe to the electronic newsletter to receive information.

Combining my online observations and the results of the questionnaire could easily lead to the conclusion that, although the Church offers different platforms to follow the streaming services, read the sacred text, and interact on its digital platforms, the LPCB members' use of the virtual environments is primarily passive. The digital presence of the Church is essentially exploited to find information regarding the Church's activities, without any significant online religious practice or interaction among members. In line with the expectation expressed by the senior pastor in his statement above, LPC and LPCB pastoral activity online never encourages or engages virtual religious participation. Institutional religious digital platforms are used to 1) formally state LPC's global religious, evangelical and missionary purpose; 2) represent the hierarchical structure of the Church, which is based on promoting the activities of the central church in Smyrna; 3) consolidate a narrative of identification without stimulating independent interaction among members.

However, the last part of the questionnaire, which asked LPCB members how they stay in touch with the rest of the community, revealed an interesting aspect that called out for a more in-depth study. Independent of the official online platforms of the Church, members share an unofficial and informal religious online communication that overturns the interaction patterns analyzed thus far.

6 LifePointers: A Hidden Virtual/Real Religious Community

Aside from the official LPC digital platforms, members created two closed Facebook groups administrated only by Church members and set to be invisible and inaccessible to all but those who have been invited to subscribe to them. In that way, only those who are already members of the

group can add new members. These access rules are clearly posted and displayed at the top of the groups' pages:

> December 9, 2015
>
> **F.J.:**
>
> Dear all,
>
> I would like to underline that this group is a safe place to communicate. Not only is the group secret (not visible to non-members), it also only contains members we all know and are of the LifePoint family. I have further made it so that I need to approve any new members that will be added.

The two groups are different in their composition: the larger one includes some 350 participants from all LPC campuses, whereas the smaller group comprises fewer than a hundred people connected to the Brussels campus.[7]

Any observation of the interaction on these group pages immediately reveals intense communication among members based on the sharing of photos and prayers related not only to the activities of LPC, but also to the daily religious experiences of the members. In both groups, religious interactivity and intimacy among members are much deeper than those observed on the official LPC online platforms. Moreover, the intimacy and interactivity within the smaller group are greater than within the larger group. The larger group's page is updated weekly, especially during the Sunday services, and communication often intensifies during special moments for the community.

For example, while I was conducting my research two dramatic events indirectly and directly struck Belgium. In November 2015, a curfew was announced in Brussels following the terrorist attack at the Bataclan concert hall in Paris. Then, in March 2016, Brussels itself was the victim of an attack. During these tragic events, the international community of LifePointers[8] in the larger Facebook group supported the Brussels community by expressing online their feelings of strong solidarity, closeness and religious assistance.

During the days of the Brussels curfew, the Brussels campus remained closed for more than two weeks, but members kept in touch via the local Facebook group page by organizing private Sunday meetings to watch online streaming services from Smyrna (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2). Simultaneously the rest of the LifePointers who subscribe to the group pages took part digitally in these private services, posting and sharing pictures.

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[7]   In order to respect the privacy of the groups, I will not divulge the names of their Facebook pages.
[8]   The congregants generally refer to themselves as LifePointers.

November 21, 2015

F. J.: Tomorrow's service is cancelled; if anyone wants to meet for fellow time, we could have a movie afternoon at my place. Strictly LifePointers.

November 21, 2015, h: 11:13

C.N.: Really?

November 21, 2015, h: 11:27

R.V.: Oooh!

Figure 1

Figure 2

The night after the attack that directly involved Brussels, all LifePointers demonstrated their closeness to the Brussels groups by writing messages of solidarity on the larger group's Facebook page. In the meantime the congregants in Brussels gathered themselves on this virtual platform, devoting it to the search for mutual religious assistance, as the comment below shows:

March 22, 2016 h: 23:57

F. J.: Dear all, Thank you for your prayers of support. I know this has meant a lot to all of us and has been that shining light throughout the day. The day has been a real reminder of the battle we have and why this must continue. There will be countless stories of sadness, loss, chaos and darkness.

One bright story I want to share with you all: By chance, one of our diplomats found a school class – some 20 teenagers (14–15 years old) lost in a park some blocks from the Embassy. We got them back and, out of nothing, the reception was filled with teenage laughter and smiles. As if by magic, 40 pounds of spaghetti Bolognese came out of nowhere and the kids got a proper meal. After a few challenges, a bomb risk (where we had to evacuate the kids to the garden) and other things, we were able to escort them to their bus, which was parked a few minutes away and was ready to drive them back to Denmark. And at that instant, the school bus was suddenly 'upgraded' to an unofficial diplomatic Greyhound service, giving a free lift to some stranded people [including] Danish government employees, one of them a lady who had her last day at the embassy after 3 years of service.

So the moral for me is: God has indeed been at work here, creating small miracles in this really complicated chaos.

Would you all continue to pray for us, The Church and the city?

In love, F.J.

Likes: 54

Comments:

March 23, 2016 h: 0:00

B. H.: Continued prayers.

March 23, 2016 h: 0:06

K. L.: Continued prayers today and always!!! And sending you all huge hugs!!! We love you all!!!

March 23, 2016 h: 0:09

J. M.: Always!

March 23, 2016 h: 0:32

E. M.: Be safe, F.J. Praying for you and my LifePoint Brussels family.

March 23, 2016 h: 0:55

B. W.: Praying.

March 23, 2016 h: 1:00

L. P. G.: Love hearing special God stories out of tragedy. Thx for sharing. You know my heart will be in constant prayer for all of you.

March 23, 2016 h: 1:09

C. H.: Praying for you and all our church family always

March 23, 2016 h: 1:15

B. S.: Continuing to pray. We love you all!

March 23, 2016 h: 1:17

M. W.: Praying always.

March 23, 2016 h: 1:29

K. G.: Thank you for the update! Praying!

March 23, 2016 h: 1:38

J. R. G.: Praying!

March 23, 2016 h: 2:32

C. J. C.: Wow! So awesome to see God at work in every situation. He holds it all.

March 23, 2016 h: 4:47

D. M.: Thank you so much for sharing F.! I was just sharing with someone today that I will still give God Praise & Glorify Him no matter the circumstance because He deserves Praise first of all but also because He is always working whether seen or unseen... So grateful you saw Him work in this way today & that you & others were able to be involved with Him in His specific work! Love you brother & continuing to pray!

As already mentioned, on the smaller group page – used mostly by Brussels members – the interaction among subscribers is even more informal and familiar than that which occurs on the larger group page. Indeed, the intimate conversations on the local group page are fostered by the personal and direct contact that people have during the Sunday services. The page is updated several times a week, and the contents of the interaction are based on the personal and private experiences of members who explicitly require religious support from the group.

September 14, 2015 h: 22:50

R.: Hey guys, I know it's late, and maybe I won't have any answer, but God put in my heart the need to pray for you so tell me if you have a prayer request. ☺

Likes: 9

Comments:

September 15, 2015 h: 2:39

A. R.: would you pray for my mother? She's in the hospital. Thank you. Miss you!

September 15, 2015 h: 3:32

K.: will be traveling tomorrow to South Dakota.

September 15, 2015 h: 4:23

B: I'm traveling to Kansas tomorrow for work. Also, have had some sinus pain today, so please pray for healing. Thank you R. Please let me/us know how we can pray for you.

September 15, 2015 h: 7:04

R.: I will pray for you all. I woke up with a stomach pain this morning and I have to watch my niece today, so please pray that's not a virus and that the pain will go away… Thank you ☺

Likes: 3

September 15, 2015 h: 7:04

C: This is awesome R.! A. I'll be praying for your mom. K. and B. I'm also praying for your travels. Our co-op starts today, we are leading devotions. I'm teaching back to school class and elementary art class. Prayers treasured!

September 15, 2015 h: 7:27

R. B.: Hello. Great idea R. You can pray for me as Sunday I am preaching on Romans 4:13–25. Thanks, will pray for all those other requests too.

Likes: 1

September 15, 2015 h: 7:34

Y: Praying for your mom **A** and for you my friend R.

September 15, 2015 h: 8:42

A. K.: Would you pray for me R.? I feel I am going to be sick – I have a very strong headache and sore throat. Thank you!

September 15, 2015 h: 8:45

A. K.: A. I'm praying for your mother, R I am praying for you, K. and B. I am praying for your safe travels

September 15, 2015 h: 10:07

R.: Prayed for you all ☺ and thank you for the prayers, I already feel a bit better ☺

September 15, 2015 h: 23:39

C. C.: Since you asked, please pray for A's Mom; safe travels for K and for B; for P; for K and D; S and K missionaries in San Salvador; D T's studies; and for R and C; M and AC; and, L and A; and for R B! R I am praying for you, too! Thank You!

September 15, 2015 h: 23:50

G. K.: I'll be praying for all of you ☺ Please pray for my sister's wedding. She's supposed to get married in less than a month but the Belgian administration is complicating the procedures because she's Congolese and her fiancé is Belgian. Thank you. <3

The informal communication performed on these group pages helps to construct a shared narrative of religious and personal solidarity among members spread all over the world. For both groups, the delimitation of a private and exclusive space, dedicated to members' needs, is a remarkable example of the construction of an ideal 'atmosphere' to accommodate religious practices and values, an 'atmosphere' totally absent from the official and public communication of the Church.

7 Reflections and Discussion

The privacy offered by these two groups accommodates informal, unofficial, decentralized communication that greatly improves and integrates the official offline and online religious practices and narratives of the entire international community of LifePointers. On these Facebook group pages, members intensify their relationships, interacting even more frequently than would be possible for them to do in the offline spaces.

The larger group's page – covering wide geographic distances – allows members to share weekly religious and personal experiences that they would most likely never be able to share physically. The same happens for the smaller Brussels group, where members can improve their group cohesion, interacting not only during the Sunday services, but also in their daily lives. In contrast to the official online communication, unofficial LPC online communication helps to create 1) a supportive religious narrative among members; 2) a deeper interaction and emotional intimacy among members; and 3) a daily exchange of religious/personal experiences and practices.

Observing the interaction on these group pages through the lens of RSST, it becomes evident that members not only create their narrative of religious mutual support and solidarity, but also renegotiate the rules of interaction with technology. The presumed expectation that Facebook will be used to create an open network of people is converted by members into a closed and exclusive

space where members can privately share their religious and personal feelings. Choosing their moral economy – i.e., the people who can join the group and their patterns of interaction – members identify a virtual space set apart to reinforce their communal religious practices and group identity.

8 Conclusion

In the final analysis, the two different usages of the Internet made by LPC call into question the general definition of the Internet as a 'sacramental space', as argued by Campbell (2005). Following her formulation, it would be possible to lump together in this same definition the understanding of the Internet according to the senior pastor, the official online presence of LPC, and the deeper religious interaction that occurs in the secret Facebook groups. However, according to the very meaning of the term 'sacramental' – as understood in the Durkheimian tradition – the creation of the two secret Facebook groups can be intended exactly as the social construction of a space separated from the other (virtual) spaces of daily life. Indeed, as soon as the members cross the virtual 'threshold' of these groups, they perceive that they are entering a special 'atmosphere' that allows them to share the same religious grammar (Rosati 2015). Such an atmosphere, which is an integral aspect of Campbell's definition of the Internet as a sacramental space, is clearly absent from LPC's official online communication.

In conclusion, religious communities such as LPC show how the 'real' and the 'virtual' lives can become integrated with each other in order to consolidate religious communities. As seen above, the interconnection of the offline and the online spheres can foster group solidarity and cohesion, overcoming some of the inevitable constraints imposed by offline communication. Finally, this research – highlighting the differentiated usages of the Internet made by LPC members – encourages further studies to reflect on the nuances of 'being online' for religious groups, pointing out that the same religious community can use and conceive of the Internet in different ways depending on whether the context is private or public, formal or informal.

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Biography

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Internet in the Monastery

Construction or Deconstruction of the Community?

Isabelle Jonveaux

Abstract

Monasticism is characterized by community life in a specific place (*stabilitas loci*), but also by local and translocal networks that correspond to different functions of the monastery (religious, cultural, commercial, etc.). Although Max Weber describes monasteries as out-of-the-world institutions, most monastic communities (at least male ones) have Internet access and an online presence now. The use of digital media in monastic life raises a number of questions: What impact does it have on the community life of monks and nuns? Can it jeopardize the quality of community life? Regarding the external communication of the monastery, does its online presence allow the monks to extend the community beyond the cloister? This paper analyzes the role played by digital media in monastic life on the individual and community levels, and on the monastery's outside communication with various audiences.

Keywords

1 Introduction

The lives of people consecrated in monastic orders (such as Benedictines, Cistercians, and Trappists) differ from the lives of members of apostolic orders (such as Franciscans, Dominicans, and Jesuits) in that it is characterized by the notion of *stabilitas loci* (stability of the place). This means that a monk or a nun enters a specific monastery and community and will probably stay in the same place for the rest of his or her life. A specific vow corresponds to this concept. Monasteries are therefore rooted in a particular place. However, they also develop local and translocal networks

by integrating the communities in their local environments and by constructing ties within and across congregations and orders. Since the Middle Ages, monasteries have developed national and international networks through trade, diplomacy, and culture (see Schmitz 1942). In this sense, monastic networks are not entirely new, and the monastic 'out-of-the-worldliness' described by Max Weber (1988, p. 259) does not mean that there is a complete lack of contact between monastic communities and the outside world or other monasteries. Today, the use of new digital media[1] is a common feature of monastic life. Monks the world over often have an Internet connection, a personal smartphone and, sometimes, a page on social media.

Monastic life – also called cenobitic life – is a form of consecrated life in a community where monks or nuns live together under the same roof. It also aims to build an alternative society which, according to Jean Séguy's (2014, p. 288) definition of utopia, prefigures on Earth the Kingdom of God to come. The dimension of community is nowadays becoming more and more important in monastic life. In her research on monastic life in France, Danièle Hervieu-Léger noted:

> Among the topics that the monks mentioned in the interviews, the centrality of the community and of community life to the definition of monastic life is definitely one of the most recurring and prominent ones. (Hervieu-Léger 2017, p. 245, my translation from the original French)

Similarly, in a study about monastic asceticism, I found that the monks and nuns most often cited community life as the most important aspect of asceticism (Jonveaux 2018a, p. 106). Furthermore, in an investigation I conducted into the image young Catholic people have of monastic life, community life was the most frequently mentioned positive dimension of monastic life (34.4%). Interstingly, it was also the third most frequent response (18%) to a question addressing the perceived negative dimensions of monasticism (Jonveaux 2018b, pp. 144–146). This suggests that community life in a time of individualism is sought out by young monastics when they enter monastic life, but at the same time represents a challenge for them. I will show here how the use of digital media in monastic life reflects these tensions between individualism and community life.

In this context, what role does the use of digital media play in monastic community life? At the beginning of the Internet age, Howard Rheingold, author of *The Virtual Community* (1993), and others described digital media as a possible means to construct an authentic community. Do digital media play this role in monastic contexts, or do they rather impair some dimensions of community? And how do digital networks and 'virtual communities' (Casilli 2010, p. 57) affect the offline monastic community?

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[1] Digital media refer to what Heidi Campbell defines as new media: "New media is that generation of media which emerges on the contemporary landscape and offers new opportunities for social interaction, information sharing, and mediated communication" (Campbell 2010, p. 9).

Drawing on field studies conducted in European and African Catholic monasteries, this article explores how the use of digital media impacts monastic community life and how it builds networks around the monastery. First, I will analyze the adjustments in the monastic community required by use of digital media. Then I will discuss to what extent digital media are also used to improve the quality of community life. Finally, I will investigate the diverse networks monasteries are building with their online presence.

2 Monastic Community and Media: Adjustments and Dislocation

When I asked monks if they have access to the Internet, some replied that it goes without saying; otherwise, as one Austrian Cistercian monk said, "we would not be able to use a car to go to Vienna, either, but would have to go by horse instead". In contrast, the stronger enclosure of female monasteries leads to nuns' greater suspicion of the new media (Jonveaux 2013, p. 32). Female communities are often older on average than male communities, which means that the members are generally less interested in new technologies and had less experience with them before they entered monastic life. Furthermore, nuns perform most of their activities within the monasteries, and for this reason are less in contact with the outside world than monks, who are, for instance, involved in pastoral activities. Nevertheless, for both monks and nuns, the question is no longer whether they use the Internet or not, but how they use it and to what purpose.

2.1 Why do monasteries need to communicate?

The monastery seems at first glance to cut off communication with the outside world by building an enclosure. As Raymond Boudon says, an "[e]nclosure protects the utopian society against corruption from outside and against the threat of strangers" (Boudon & Bourricaud 1986, p. 78). This physical enclosure made of walls and railings is also a symbolic barrier that allows the community to control communication with the outside world. Prior to the Second Vatican Council, it was common practice for personal letters to be read by the abbot or master of novices before they were forwarded on to the monks or nuns to whom they were addressed. But monastic communities have always had communication with the outside world for religious or economic purposes. Digital media can, potentially, provide new channels for such communication.

However, the constitution of an online community and the extension of the monastic community online are not essential aims of monasteries. Monks and nuns use digital media first for their own purposes (personal communication, information, online shopping, research, etc.). A

second use of digital media concerns the activities of the monasteries. A monastery is indeed a multipurpose institution that has religious, economic, cultural, and social functions. As I will present later, digital media are also used for these functions. Finally, some communities engage in active projects of pastoral outreach through digital media, such as the app *Hora Benedicti*, developed by the Benedictine monastery of Disentis (Switzerland), which allows people to receive a chapter of the Rule of Saint Benedict and a small commentary every day. Another example is the 'monastic channel' on YouTube, where the Cistercian monks of Heiligenkreuz (Austria) post videos about their monastic life. In both cases, monastic communities are producing what Christopher Helland calls "an online religion environment which allows people to live their religious beliefs and practices through the Internet medium itself" (Helland 2005, p. 12). In the case of the app *Hora Benedicti*, like the prayer slide shows of Canadian nuns studied by David Douyère (2015a), the goal is also to produce online material "to give rise to prayer", as Douyère puts it. For Helland, "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" (Helland 2005, p. 13). Monasteries, to the contrary, view the Internet as an environment where people can live their religion. Even the production and distribution of these digital contents constitute, for the monks and nuns who are responsible for them, a true pastoral activity.

2.2 Impacts of digital media on monastic community life

Does the use of digital media change the way of monastic community life? In contemporary society, the time spent using media has increased significantly. According to a survey by GroupM, the prominent media investment group, the average amount of time spent online in France in 2018 was 3.3 hours daily, up from 2.7 hours in 2015.[2] Monastic life is organized around a strict schedule that determines times of work, prayer, and rest. Such rigorous use of time is, according to Michel Foucault, a category of discipline that reflects the "principle of non-idleness: it was forbidden to waste time, which was counted by God and paid by men" (Foucault 1977, p. 154). Benedict in his Rule condemns idleness and describes it as the "enemy of the soul" (RB 48.1). In the strict monastic time schedule, it is therefore difficult to find time for online surfing and communication without taking it away from other activities. This leads some monks to dip into their sleeping time to write their emails, as I observed when I received emails from monks sent at 2 o'clock in the morning. Other monks choose not to have computers in their cells in order to avoid the temptation to surf the Internet at night.

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[2]   See https://www.offremedia.com/groupm-prevoit-que-le-temps-passe-digital-depassera-celui-de-la-tv-lineaire-dans-le-monde-en-2018 (viewed June 26, 2018).

Parallel to this, monastics themselves have recognized a new need for communication in and outside the community. In a book written by four French sisters and brothers reflecting on the consecrated life today, the authors observe that an increased need for communication with the outside world was felt within the religious community. They identified three common trends:

- the need to be informed was felt *more strongly* than the need to be together;

- the need to communicate was greater than the need to dialog;

- the need to be able to choose a network of relationships (family, friends, network among sisters) that is no longer exclusively in religious life (or in the community to which they belong), in order to recharge one's batteries by maintaining contact with relatives.

(Fino et al. 2008, p. 146, my translation from the original French)

Digital media are now part of monastic life. In vast monasteries that have become too large for the shrinking size of many of the communities, it is common for monks to call one another on their mobile phones to find out where they are in the monastery or to ask something. The last time I was in an Austrian Benedictine monastery (February 2018), one monk sent an email to another one to organize meeting for dinner, just as in a modern firm. It was probably easier than trying to find him in the dining hall. In the early years of my research on monastic life, monks and nuns who had important functions in the community had pagers so they could be informed when someone called on the phone or was looking for them. Digital media were therefore adopted in the monastic community to facilitate the internal communication of the community. But the increasing reliance on digital media can also damage the community link, especially when monks and nuns start communicating more by digital media than face to face. Karl Wallner, a Cistercian monk from Heiligenkreuz in Austria, relates the humorous example of his abbot, who told him that he consults the homepage of the monastery every day to know what is going on within his own community (Wallner 2011). Digital media can therefore support communication within the community, but can also be responsible for a decrease in face-to-face communication.

2.3 Privatization of communication in monastic life

In monastic life, communication used to be a community responsibility, which meant that individual monks and nuns did not have private communication with the outside world. Until the Second Vatican Council, the ideal of monastic life was the fusion of individuals into the single community. The current individualization of monastic life is first and foremost a direct consequence of the

overall trend in society in general (Hervieu-Léger 2017, p. 159). However, it is also reinforced by the possibility offered by new technologies and media to perform privately a number of tasks that, previously, were conducted at the community level. This issue is not really new, for the following question was already raised regarding landline telephones (Sastre Santos 1997, p. 904): should monks be allowed to have phones in their individual cells, or should there only be a single line for the whole community? A similar dilemma came to the fore when some monks wanted to have television sets in their cells.

The mobile phone, which almost every Austrian monk has,[3] individualizes phone communication even further, as monks are no longer dependent on the community's shared landline. The same trend can be observed with email and social media network accounts. Many female monastic communities still have a single unique email address for the entire community, but this is no longer the case for the great majority of male monasteries.

2.4 Individualization of the image of the community?

Individual social network accounts inevitably raise the issue of how the community wants to portray itself to the outside world and who controls such public communication. Some monasteries have decided to have a community account on Twitter or Facebook to broadcast in the name of the community to the outside world. For instance, the abbeys of Heiligenkreuz, Admont, and Kremsmünster in Austria have community Facebook pages with, respectively, 23,000, 14,000, and 617 followers (figures June 2018). In these cases, a monk (as in Heiligenkreuz) or a lay employee (as in Kremsmünster) administers the page by posting news about the community and its members, the cultural dimensions of the monastery (library, concerts, exhibitions), and spiritual content. On the Facebook page of Admont, a picture representing the monastery or of nature with a quotation from the Rule of Benedict is posted every week by a monk from the community.

Individual monks and nuns may also have personal accounts that they use to communicate about the community. These, however, constitute personal communication and can no longer be considered the communication of the institution. Changes in the form of monastic public communication, as well as potential conflicts between the personal communication of individual monks and nuns and the monasteries' official position, prompt important questions regarding the authority structures in the community and control over the image of the community that is projected to the outside world. Are individual monks or nuns becoming religious leaders when they have many online followers? In this respect, it is important to underline that abbots and abbesses rarely

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[3]   We have not observed this in France or in communities of nuns, where generally only monks or nuns who have important functions within the community have personal mobile phones.

have personal accounts on online social media networks. Although religious authorities are generally middle-aged men, online social media allows other profiles to acquire a certain religious legitimacy (see Millet-Mouity & Madore 2018, p. 14). Those who are active on online social networks are often younger monks (or, more rarely, nuns) who were already acquainted with these media before they entered monastic life. Some of them reach large audiences of up to 5,000 friends on Facebook. One Austrian Cistercian monk, for instance, has 4,979 friends, and a Benedictine monk from the Netherlands has 4,884. In these cases, it seems that the individual monks are promoting themselves (their personal activities, pictures, etc.) more than the community. Indeed, "many religious and spiritual leaders use social media like Instagram in order to position and promote themselves and their causes" (Zijderveld 2017, p. 127). When a monk posts many 'selfies' (or other pictures of himself) and when people reply to or comment about the monk on a personal level, then it begins to look like a case of personal 'branding'. One Cistercian monk even got 231 'likes' simply for posting that he would be 'offline' for a few days. The personal communication of a religious leader nowadays reaches a larger audience than the institution's online communication: "The position of religious leaders has become more significant as [a result of] the personification of religious organizations, traditions, or movements on media such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. In the case of Pope Francis, it is clear that his personal Instagram account (4.9 million followers) is much more popular than the official Vatican news account @newsva (1.24 K followers)" (Zijderveld 2017, p. 128).

Cenobitic monastic life, unlike the individual asceticism of anchorites,[4] aims to develop a community charisma and not an individual one. In this sense, the charisma of an individual monk can jeopardize the community (Jonveaux 2018a, p. 247). For this reason the monastic discipline seeks to merge personal virtuosity with the community. "The force of monastic Rules was to moderate such individualism and to warn of the temptations lurking even in competitions between athletes of Christ" (Harpham 1987, p. 29). In the fourth century, for instance, Simeon Stylites had such extreme ascetic practice that he was expelled twice from his monastic community. The regulation of communication between the personal and community levels is, therefore, an important point in monastic life.

Intensive communication with the outside world can also, according to some monks and nuns, lead to a distancing from the community life. As one German sister writes, "Talking on the phone or on the Internet can hinder the practice of silence, and can be a form of separating oneself from God and the other sisters" (Jansing 2009, p. 430, my translation from the original German). When some monks or nuns are very active on social media and post large amounts of personal pictures and messages on their pages, it seems that they want to gain social recognition outside the

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[4]   Anchorites, or hermits, are ascetics who have withdrawn completely from society and live alone, not in a community.

monastic community (Jonveaux 2013, p. 107). For instance, Scissors, Burke, and Wengrovitz showed that "the lower someone's self-esteem, the more people think getting enough Likes is important" (2016, p. 1507). But according to Abbruzzese's idea of social disinvestment (*desinvestimento sociale*), monks and nuns should renounce all kinds of social recognition (Abbruzzese 2000, p. 47). This is the aspect of monastic asceticism concerning the use of the Internet to which I shall now turn my attention.

2.5 Internet asceticism of monks and nuns

Monks are, according to Max Weber, "virtuosi of asceticism" (Weber 1976, p. 345), which implies a distance from the world and a methodical way of life. The Internet brings into the monastery the possibility of having access to the whole world from the cloister and, sometimes, even from the individual cell. As a consequence, in order to maintain the fundamental characteristics of monastic life, monks and nuns have to find a way to protect their enclosure while they are using the Internet. It is for this reason that almost all French monastic communities have decided to set up computer rooms with access to the Internet. This can also involve peer control between monks, who keep an eye out for other monks who spend too much time surfing on the Internet or consulting the kinds of pages that would be contrary to monastic life. Some communities also have a filter for pornographic content. A French Benedictine of the Abbey of Solesmes told me in 2010: "It would naturally be totally contradictory to have Internet in the cell." In a lot of monasteries in France the abbot cuts off the connection after the last prayers of the day and restores it after the first prayers in the morning. This way, monks can observe the "great silence of the night", as Saint Benedict expresses it in his Rule. In Austrian monasteries, however, where monks are active in parishes and at schools, such a discipline does not exist: almost all monks have Internet access in their cells, but often say that it is out of necessity, especially when their work entails contact with the outside world. Nevertheless, we can also observe monks trying to impose various kinds of personal ascetic discipline on themselves. For instance, the novice master of Kremsmünster, in Austria, chooses not to have a computer in his cell and aims not to go into his office after Compline (the last of the canonical hours, marking the end of the working day). A young monk in the Cistercian Heiligenkreuz monastery also told me that he aims to use the Internet for no longer than thirty minutes a day, and he observes a Facebook 'fast' on days of meat abstinence in the community, that is, on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. In some communities, monks can also voluntarily install a control on the pages they are consulting.

Control over the use of digital media is therefore becoming an important aspect of ascetic discipline that allows these media to be integrated into monastic life without impairing it. But it can result in tensions: monks and nuns in both Austria and France admit that it is more difficult for them to 'fast' from the Internet and digital social media than from meat, especially for the new

generation, which grew up with the Internet. Nevertheless, the Internet is generally accepted in monasteries because it provides advantages that serve the goals of the monastic communities.

3 When Digital Media Contributes to the Quality of Monastic Life

3.1 Communicate without going out of the monastery

Monasteries are theoretically apart from the outside world, and their distance from it is expressed in their rules of seclusion. Even when they perform social activities in society, they are symbolically apart from the world. As Max Weber explains:

> Concentration upon the actual pursuit of salvation may entail a formal withdrawal from the 'world': from social and psychological ties with the family, from the possession of worldly goods, and from political, economic, artistic, and erotic activities – in short from all creaturely interests. (Weber 1978, p. 542).

The Internet can present a great opportunity for monastics, because it means they can be present in the world without leaving the monastery. For a variety of communication aims (pastoral, economic, cultural), they can communicate with the world and be in the same 'places' as other actors within society.

Monasteries are not really visible in a secularized society, especially where they do not have an associated school and where monks do not work in the parishes, as is the case, for instance, in France (Jonveaux 2011). Being present on the Internet allows monastic communities to be visible at the same level as other religious groups or suppliers of monastic products. Christopher Helland observed this phenomenon for minority religious groups in Canada:

> Diverse religious groups and religious minorities may have received the greatest benefit from the creation of the World Wide Web. Due to the relatively inexpensive cost of building and maintaining a Website, these groups gained a unique opportunity to present information about themselves to the community in which they lived and also the world at large (Helland 2008, p. 132).

The dissemination by monastic communities of information about themselves and their activities is not new, as monasteries often had – or still have – a newsletter or a small review for friends of the community. However, with the Internet, the visibility of the community has, theoretically speaking, no frontier anymore and can potentially reach people who do not have a preexisting link with the

community. As Katrien Pype observes, online social media are always localized because individuals are present in a definite physical space when they are interacting with online content (Pype 2018, p. 136). In this sense, the visibility of the community has frontiers imposed by, for instance, language, but the religious boundaries are less relevant. Digital media therefore increase the visibility of monasteries in secularized society.

3.2 Media as an answer to new challenges of monastic life

It is well known that one of the greatest challenges for monasteries in Western Europe nowadays is recruitment. The present evolution in the demography of monastic communities brings about various changes in the way monastic life is lived. One new question is the training and the place of novices in communities, as these days they often enter in cohorts of one and are, therefore, alone, not only in the community but also sometimes in the entire congregation. Two years ago, the Austrian Benedictine congregation counted only one novice. On other continents such as Africa, postulants and novices constitute a cohesive group in itself, or sometimes, as in the female monastery of Karen (Nairobi, Kenya), two separate groups. This is how it used to be in Western Europe as well, but no longer. Digital media can compensate for the lack of contact with young monks or nuns within the community, as Bernhard Eckerstorfer, an Austrian Benedictine monk, maintains:

> As an illustration of the significance of having contacts within the order, I can imagine the example of a Redemptorist who uses Skype to stay in touch with an Irish brother he met in Rome at a meeting for young Redemptorists. […] Is there not the danger, without these possibilities, that such people will look for the 'kick' [of social contact] outside the order? (Eckerstorfer 2012, p. 35, my translation from the original German).

In the same way, the training of young monastics is constrained by the fact that communities are reluctant to send them to study in other cities or countries for periods of two or three years because they need these young forces in the community. It is for this reason that the possibility of developing online distance courses for a variety of masterclasses is being discussed, for instance, at the Benedictine University of Sant'Anselmo in Rome. The idea of building translocal communities within the orders with the help of online media to overcome some of the difficulties of contemporary monastic life offline is therefore emerging in monastic communities.

3.3 Support for the liquid community

Monastic use of digital media also constitutes support for 'liquid' communities that arise during meetings and events. Modern religiosity indeed is characterized by the highlights, such as major events, which build, for a short time, a new community based on enthusiasm and collective exaltation (Hervieu-Léger 2001, p. 83). These are 'liquid' communities in Bauman's terms (2005) because they come to life as physical communities only for the time of the event, then dissipate, but can be reconstituted in the framework of another event. As Bauman (2005, p. 1) explains, "'Liquid life' is a kind of life that tends to be lived in a liquid modern society. 'Liquid modern' is a society in which the conditions under which its members act change faster than it takes the ways of acting to consolidate into habits and routines." The cement of this community is the emotion that was lived and shared during the event.

With the goal of youth ministry in mind, some monasteries organize events for young people. They also hope that the link created with the monastery and socialization in the monastic framework can attract young people to the monastic life. For instance, the abbey of Kremsmünster in Upper Austria organizes a monthly meeting for young people called *Treffpunkt Benedikt* (Meeting Point Benedict). A Facebook page especially created for these meetings helps to maintain the link between events. In an interview, a French Dominican told me about an online retreat for Lent in 2007 for which they were using the Internet because they wanted to speak the same language that the people are speaking nowadays (Jonveaux 2007, p. 159). But this 'language' of digital media is changing quickly, and religious institutions have to adapt their media profiles if they want to stay in touch with young people. The survey *Jugend-Internet-Monitor 2017* in Austria showed that the online social networks young people between the ages of 11 and 17 prefer are, first, WhatsApp (93%), then YouTube (90%); Facebook comes in at a distant fifth place.[5] This suggests that Facebook is no longer the best means of communication to reach young people, which is why the communications manager of *Treffpunkt Benedikt* also opened a WhatsApp group in August 2017.

Does monastic presence online seek to activate the local community around the monastery – that is, people who are already in contact with the monastery – or the translocal community of people who have never been to the monastery or who perhaps had contact only once? A survey I conducted in 2017 on the digital offers of the Austrian Franciscans, an apostolic order, for the youth ministry showed that most of the young people surveyed (79%) already knew or had met both Franciscans friars who are engaged in these activities. On the other hand, however, monastic presence on online social networks also allows people who otherwise would not directly speak with

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[5]   See   https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20170315_OTS0025/jugend-internet-monitor-2017-das-sind-die-beliebtesten-sozialen-netzwerke-von-jugendlichen-bild (viewed on August 10, 2018).

a priest or go to a church to ask questions or chat with monks and nuns. For instance, a Cistercian monk from Heiligenkreuz told me in an interview that he receives four or five personal questions a day from young people who would never go to a church to ask such questions.

4 Digital Liaisons of Monastic Communities[6]

Monastic communities develop digital links with different audiences in the outside world according to the aim of the communication. We can identify five main aims of such communication:

- to link with the local community and provide information (e.g., regarding Mass, etc.);
- to provide touristic and cultural information regarding the monastery (visits, history, opening hours of the shop, etc.);
- for economic purposes (online sales, presentation of products and economic activities, etc.);
- to provide religious content for evangelization and pastoral purposes;
- to establish contact with young people who are interested in the monastic life ("How to become a monk").

Since online monastic communication has different goals and tries to reach different kinds of audiences, it is necessary for monastic communities to define their target group in order to improve their communication strategy. Let us explore the characteristics of each profile.

4.1 Friends and oblates: the spiritual community

There have always been, around the monasteries, lay people who are close to the monastic community without belonging to it. These people develop a spiritual link with the community and want to stay in contact with it between their visits. It also happens that people visit the monastery only once, but want to maintain a connection. The homepages of monastic communities seek to maintain this contact with close friends of the community. For instance, in Keur Moussa, a Benedictine abbey in Senegal,[7] one monk produces numerous videos about the community, its events, and the village in order to keep close friends of the community informed and to give them the sense that they are in close touch with the community. These messages are especially important for those oblates who have institutionalized links with the community.[8] Churchgoers who attend

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[6]   I refer here to Antonio Casilli's book, *Les Liaisons numériques* (2010).
[7]   I conducted two field inquiries in this monastery in July 2016 and March 2017.

Mass in the monastery may also be people who are disappointed because their parishes have become too 'modern'. Monastic liturgy, in contrast, remains traditional and 'authentic'.

4.2 Clients, visitors, and guests: the commercial community

Monastic presence on the Internet plays an important role for the economic and hospitality functions of the monastery. Hospitality is recommended by Saint Benedict in his Rule (chapter 53), and all monasteries living according to this Rule have a guesthouse. The guesthouse is often a non-profit activity, which means that monastic communities are not allowed to promote it through advertising. The website of the monastery can therefore help the community attract more guests, especially new guests who are not part of the community's traditional network. In 2005, just after they had launched their homepage, a French monk told me his monastery was attracting more individual guests because the guesthouse was mentioned on the Internet. Previously, they had had more groups, for instance, from parishes.

The extension of the monastic network can also be observed in the economic field. Specialized homepages allow monastic communities to sell their products online. Most of the early monastic homepages had economic or touristic aims. For instance, the Austrian Cistercian Abbey of Heiligenkreuz opened its first website in 1999 to respond to the touristic demand. Nevertheless, monastic communities do not have as a goal attracting ever more people to come and visit, because too many visitors could endanger the silence required for monastic contemplation.

Monastic products are rarely sold via the usual commercial networks, for instance in supermarkets. Online sales give the communities the opportunity to distribute their products more broadly. The main activity of the monastery of Keur Moussa in Senegal is to produce a traditional musical instrument, the *kora*, which they use for the liturgy. This community undertook the special work of adapting the Gregorian liturgy to African culture (Sarr 2016), and the introduction of the *kora* in the monastic liturgy was a part of this process. Thanks to their online presence, the monks sell more *kora*s to other African countries and even outside Africa than they do within Senegal. As of October 2014, the monks had sold 340 *kora*s in Senegal and 740 in France, which is the largest client. In total, 899 *kora*s were sold in Africa, 942 in Europe, and 80 in North America. Online sales of their CD through the websites of general retailers (e.g., Amazon, Fnac) helped to spread their liturgy, which has now been adopted in a large number of monasteries in West Africa. The monks are now thinking about selling their products on their own homepage, but they are experiencing difficulties with the online payment system.

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[8]   Oblates are lay people who live in the outside world but conduct their lives according to the Rule of Benedict (see Frank 2013, p. 228).

For the monastery of Keur Moussa, online sales of their CD are important because the local population is highly impoverished and therefore does not represent a potential market. The monastery's online presence supports its economy, which otherwise has difficulties finding new outlets.

4.3 Potential recruits

As mentioned earlier, one of the greatest challenges of monastic life in Western Europe at the beginning of the twenty-first century is recruitment. For instance, for 2017–2018 there are a total of six novices in the Austrian Benedictine congregation across a total of 14 communities. According to David Douyère, recruitment for a community is one of the main goals of religious homepages (Douyère 2015b, p. 9). But does the online presence of monastic communities help them attract more young people to the monastic life?

Interviews with young monks and nuns show that it is increasingly likely for young people to search on the Internet for a community when they are thinking about entering monastic life. The Benedictine sister Hildegard Jansing also notes that the first contact with the community often occurs through the Internet (Jansing 2009, p. 430). This is not to suggest that the Internet instills the religious vocation in young people. Nevertheless, a community that is not present on the Web has a lesser chance of attracting young people because they will not find it. As early as 2000, Jean-François Mayer noted:

> We are reaching the point where a monastery that does not have a website will 'lack' potential candidates, as young people interested in religious questions probably will – more and more – resort to the Internet as the first step in their quest. (Mayer 2000, p. 73, my translation from the original French).

Indeed, the profile of novices has radically changed in the last 50 years. Not only has the age of entry increased, but the sources of recruitment have also changed. The principal source of recruitment for monasteries that have an associated high school was the high school itself. For instance, in the abbey of Kremsmünster in Austria, only two of the 23 monks older than 65 had not studied at the monastery's school, whereas only one of the ten youngest monks had been at this school (Jonveaux 2018, p. 31). Younger monks also come from more remote geographic areas and sometimes from foreign countries. This can be understood as part of the quest for 'prophetic rupture' (Hervieu-Léger 1986, p. 95), which means that individuals have to show on the personal and social level a "personal charisma that regenerates the charisma of the function" (ibid.). In this context, young people who are interested in monastic life are more inclined to look for a community

because they do not necessarily have previous contacts with a community, and the Internet can play a role in this search.

5 Conclusion

Digital media are now part of Catholic monastic life in almost all monasteries, although monks are still more likely to use them than nuns. But this use of digital media on the individual or community level prompts us to rethink some dimensions of the community, especially in a moment when monastic life has to meet major challenges. Digital communication can in some cases compensate for some of the structural deficiencies of present monastic life – for instance, those related to the changing demography and lack of new entrants – but also answer a new need for communication with the outside world, especially at a time when individualism increasingly challenges community life. Digital media, therefore, are changing the way communication is lived in the monastic community, especially because of the possibility of exchanging views with the outside world on an individual and private level. But intensive communication of individual monks or nuns with the outside world can also impair a monastery's community life.

At the community level, digital media make the communication of the monastery with the outside world for religious, cultural, and economic purposes easier, as monastics no longer need to go out of the monastery for such purposes. In this sense, digital media can reinforce the stability of the community, allowing monasteries to be more present in the world and in the same place as other social actors even while remaining at home. This online presence can be especially important in monasteries' efforts to find new clients. Nevertheless, too big an online presence could lead to too many visitors, thereby threatening the quietude of the monastic community. With this in mind, monasteries must strive to find a balance between these new online approaches and their ages-old goals of contemplation and silence.

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Biography

Dr. ISABELLE JONVEAUX is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Graz and an affiliated member of the Centre d'Etudes en Sciences Sociales du Religieux (EHESS Paris). In 2013 she published a monograph on the use of new media in Catholic monastic life (*Dieu en ligne*). She wrote her habilitation thesis (University of Fribourg) on new forms of fasting in modern society, including voluntary abstinence from the Internet. Her interests include contemporary monastic life in Europe, Africa, and South America, monastic economy, religious practices on the Internet, and new forms of asceticism.

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Religion, Media, and Joint Commitment

Jehovah's Witnesses as a 'Plural Subject'

Andrea Rota

Abstract

Drawing on the example of Jehovah's Witnesses, in this contribution I will explore the role of media in the production of religious commitment. I will argue that, while providing important insights into the relationship between media interpretation and media use, the popular concept of 'religious-social shaping of technology' (Campbell) risks producing an excessively uniform picture of an interpretive community. To outline a more dynamic conception of religious communities, I will introduce a theoretical framework derived from the emerging philosophical fields of collective intentionality and social ontology. In particular, I will draw on the philosopher Margaret Gilbert's work on 'joint intentions' and sketch a frame for the analysis of Jehovah's Witnesses, in their relationship with media and the Watch Tower Society, as parties in a 'plural subject'.

Keywords

1 Introduction

In the study of media and society, deterministic views that predicate a direct effect of media and media content on the masses of passive consumers (e.g., McLuhan and Fiore 1967) or postulate a distinctive logic of the media (e.g., Hjarvard 2008, 2013) are the object of growing criticism from scholars of religion and media (e.g., Krüger 2018; Lövheim 2011). To break out of the deterministic mold, numerous authors have emphasized how the production and use of media are linked to interpretative processes through which new technologies are adapted to specific contexts and goals

(Ayaß 2007; Campbell 2010; Krüger 2012). In this contribution, I discuss the potential and the limits of this hermeneutic approach and suggest some improvements regarding its application to the study of the dynamic relationship between media use and the constitution of religious communities.[1]

At the core of this approach lies an inversion of perspective that the sociologists Elihu Katz and David Foulkes put in the following terms: "[T]he question [is] not 'What do the media do to people?' but, rather, 'What do people do with the media?'" (Katz & Foulkes 1962, p. 387, cit. in Krüger 2012, p. 12). In what follows, I shall rephrase this idea in more holistic terms and ask, "What do *religious communities* do with media?" From a theoretical point of view, this reformulation demands a reflection on the concept of community and on the relationship between the attitudes of individual members and the nature of collective action. To discuss this point, I will draw on insights from the emerging philosophical fields of social ontology and collective intentionality (Schweikard & Schmid 2013; Searle 1996, 2010). In particular, I will make use of the theory of joint commitment and plural subjects put forward by the philosopher Margaret Gilbert.

In a nutshell, I shall present the following threefold thesis: the hermeneutic approach to media and community, epitomized by the work of the theologian and media scholar Heidi Campbell, while very effective for the analysis of the 'domestication' of new technologies in religious settings, is predicated on a vague conception of the relationship between individual and collective media use and interpretation and ultimately invites one to adopt a 'summative' account of a religious collective. On the contrary, I contend that a religious community's attitude toward media does not emerge from the sum of its members' attitudes and practices, but exists autonomously from – although not necessarily in contrast with – such attitudes and practices. Furthermore, I will argue that the ritual production of a 'plural subject' (the term will be explained in due course) of a distinct collective attitude is a constitutive feature of a religious collectivity – a proposition that can be paradigmatically illustrated by the study of the religious framing of media. To flesh out this thesis, I will draw on the empirical case of Jehovah's Witnesses and present data collected through historical, quantitative, and qualitative research methods.

The article is structured as follows: after briefly presenting the history of Jehovah's Witnesses and their media production (2), I will introduce Heidi Campbell's concept of religious-social

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shaping of technology (3) and show how it can be applied to analyze both the framing of media in the Watch Tower Society's publications (4) and the declared use of media by individual Jehovah's Witnesses (5). Against this backdrop, I will discuss some shortcomings of this framework for the conceptualization of a religious community (6), and introduce an alternative model based on Margaret Gilbert's theory of plural subjects. To do so, I will proceed in three steps: first, I will present new empirical evidence that challenges the previous framework (7); second, I will provide an account of Gilbert's model (8); and, finally, I will apply it to the analysis of the ritual use of media in the Witnesses' congregational meetings (9). In my conclusion (10), I will draw attention to the methodological and theoretical consequences of my alternative analytic perspective.

2 Jehovah's Witnesses and Media Production

The denomination known today as Jehovah's Witnesses emerged from the American neo-Adventist milieu in the 1870s. Its founder, Charles Taze Russell (1852–1916), was active in the theological debate of the time and contributed to various publications before launching its magazine, *The Watchtower*, in 1879.[2] In 1881, Russell founded the publishing company Zion's Watch Tower Tract Society to print and distribute the magazine as well as other religious pamphlets and books, including Russell's successful series, *Millennial Dawn* (later renamed *Studies in the Scriptures*). Three years later, the company was incorporated and, in 1896, its name was changed to Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, Inc. (Beckford 1975, pp. 1–10; Chryssides 2016, pp. 35–62). To the present day, the Watch Tower Society[3] continues to constitute the main legal entity of Jehovah's Witnesses, and its publications represent the fundamental references in matters of doctrine and practice for Jehovah's Witnesses around the world.[4]

By 1880, there were already about 30 local groups in the United States who identified themselves with the work of Russell (Penton 2015, p. 37). However, these local ecclesiae, as they were called, were only loosely in contact with one another and were largely autonomous concerning their organization, practices, and biblical interpretations (Chryssides 2016, pp. 125–126; Penton 2015, pp. 40–43). Indeed, at the moment of founding the Watch Tower Society and launching its

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[2]   Initially entitled *Zion's Watch Tower and Herald of Christ's Presence*, the magazine went through a few name changes over the years. Since 1939, its complete title has been *The Watchtower Announcing Jehovah's Kingdom*. In this contribution, I will use the widespread shortened title, *The Watchtower*.

[3]   In this contribution, I will speak of the Watch Tower Society, the society, or the organization to refer to the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, Inc.

[4]   While the Watch Tower Society constitutes both a juridical and a religious entity, the relationship between these two dimensions is quite complex and cannot be detailed here. See Chryssides 2008, pp. lxiv–lxvii, 64; Chryssides 2016, pp. 141–144; Penton 2015, pp. 294–303.

magazine, Russell neither intended to constitute a new denomination nor to pursue a career as a religious leader (Chryssides 2016, p. 49; Penton 2015, pp. 34–40). Accordingly, in the beginning, the name he chose for his followers was, simply, 'Christians' to stress the inclusive orientation of the movement.[5] In 1910 the name was changed to 'Bible Students',[6] and in 1931, it was changed again to 'Jehovah's Witnesses' (Chryssides 2008, pp. 79–80; Penton 2015, pp. 86–87).[7] The name change in 1931 clearly marks a pivotal moment in the development of a separate group identity under the presidency of Joseph F. Rutherford (1869–1942), who succeeded Russell at the helm of the Watch Tower Society in 1916. This evolution corresponds to a period of rising tensions between the organization and the surrounding world as well.[8]

During the 25 years of his presidency, Rutherford not only staged demonstrations and discourses against the ruling political powers and mainstream religions, but also enacted important reforms. His actions helped him exert stronger control over the local congregation and push them to standardize their practices, such as the use of the Watch Tower Society's literature (Beckford 1975, pp. 25–33; Blanchard 2008, pp. 68–74). Besides the new name, Rutherford introduced many of the distinctive characteristics that are commonly associated with Jehovah's Witnesses today, such as the house-to-house ministry (Penton 2015, pp. 80–81). Concerning this missionary work, Rutherford also launched a new magazine in 1919. Originally titled *The Golden Age*, this publication was later renamed *Consolation* (1937) and finally *Awake!* (1946) (Chryssides 2008, p. 12).

The decades following the Rutherford era were marked by a diminished level of tension between the organization of Jehovah's Witnesses and the surrounding world (Introvigne 2015, pp. 77–81). Ethical concerns gradually replaced the focus on biblical prophecy, and an attitude of indifference to the outside world replaced the Society's previous rejection of the outside world (Beckford 1975, pp. 52–61). But these years were also a period of global expansion and rapid membership growth (Cragun & Lawson 2010; Stark & Iannaccone 1997). Today, Jehovah's Witnesses are (officially or unofficially)[9] present in virtually every country of the world, and the number of active members worldwide has risen from about 180,000 in 1947 to more than 8.1 million in 2016. This growth is accompanied by a constant expansion in the production of the two flagship magazines, *The Watchtower* and *Awake!* In 1960, *The Watchtower* already had a

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[5]   "Our Name." *The Watchtower*, February 1884, reprints vol. 5 (7), pp. 584–585.

[6]   "International Bible Students' Association." *The Watchtower*, April 1, 1910, reprints vol. 21 (7), p. 4593.

[7]   The Watch Tower Society used an upper case 'W' in 'Witnesses' only after 1976. Here, I follow the current capitalization convention.

[8]   In some cases, these tensions resulted in open conflicts in the streets and the courtrooms (see Henderson 2010; Knox 2013) and even in relentless persecution, notably in Germany under the Nazi regime (see Gerbe 1999) and, later, in the USSR (see Baran 2014).

[9]   Jehovah's Witnesses are currently banned or cannot operate freely in a number of countries. According to the Watch Tower Society, however, "Even in countries where the Kingdom work is banned, Christians find ways to keep on preaching the good news." "Keep Conquering the Evil with the Good." *The Watchtower*, June 1, 2007, p. 29.

circulation of 3,750,000 copies. In 2018, the number of printed copies for each edition has reached 69,804,000, confirming *The Watchtower* as the most widely circulated magazine worldwide, followed by *Awake!* with 64,905,000 copies.[10]

These data, together with the brief presentation of the foundation and development of the Watch Tower Society, provide a clear indicator of how important the production of print media is for the organization and the preaching work of Jehovah's Witnesses (Blanchard 2006; 2008). Since its early history, however, the society employed diverse media to spread its message. For instance, in 1914 Russell released the so-called *Photo-Drama of Creation*, a groundbreaking multimedia work showcasing God's plan for the world and humankind through colored glass slides and moving pictures synchronized to music and recordings of Russell's preaching. In the following two years, the drama was shown on four continents and was viewed, in its full eight-hour version or in an abbreviated adaptation, by more than nine million spectators, which testified to the society's "unqualified endorsement of moving pictures and stereopticon slides as an effective and desirable method for evangelists and teachers" (WTBTS 2014, p. 71)

Starting in the early 1920s, the Watch Tower Society was among the pioneers of religious radio broadcasting (McLeod 2010), and later freely adopted all sorts of media technology, including phonographs, 'sound cars' (vehicles with loudspeakers mounted on top), motion pictures, video and audio cassettes, floppy disks, CDs, and others (WTBTS 2014, pp. 68–77). Furthermore, to meet the need for adequate typesetting in different languages – a consequence of the society's global expansion[11] – Jehovah's Witnesses were at the forefront in the development of publishing software, releasing their Multilanguage Electronic Publishing System (MEPS) in 1986 (WTBTS 1993, pp. 114, 596–597). Finally, the introduction of the refurbished multimedia website, jw.org, in August 2012, dramatically changed the media landscape of Jehovah's Witnesses, and the development of dedicated applications for smartphones and tablets is having a great impact on their congregational activities and preaching work (Rota 2018).

3 Religious-Social Shaping of Media

On the whole, this historical overview portrays the picture of a very media-friendly organization. Nevertheless, the embracing of new media technologies by the Watch Tower Society was never

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[10]   This information, however, should not obscure the fact that some important changes have taken place in the publishing schedule and format of these magazines in recent years: fewer issues are published each year and the number of pages per issue of most magazines has been reduced from 32 to 16. See Rota (2018).

[11]   The magazines *The Watchtower* and *Awake!* are currently available in 337 and 192 languages respectively. The official website of the organization, jw.org, is at least partially translated into 950 languages (May 2018).

indiscriminate. On the contrary, a closer look at the society's adoption of new media corroborates Heidi Campbell's thesis regarding the religious-social shaping of media. In her classic study, *When Religion Meets New Media* (2010), Campbell draws on insights provided by the social shaping of technology (SST) approach to call attention to the negotiation processes that accompany the introduction of new forms of media technology in religious contexts. Scholars in the SST tradition have noted that when new technologies are welcomed into various social spheres, they go through a process of domestication, meaning that these "technologies are conditioned and tamed by users in ways that enable them to fit more neatly into the routine of daily life" (Campbell 2010, pp. 50–51). By advocating a religious-social shaping of technology (RSST) approach, Campbell wants to emphasize how "spiritual, moral, and technological codes of practice guide technological negotiation" (Campbell 2010, p. 59).

In her book, Campbell discusses examples from Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. However, she is well aware that these traditions are not internally homogeneous and that within each of them there is a variety of theological, moral, and organizational options. For this reason, her unit of analysis is not entire religious traditions, but specific communities within those traditions, conceived as "spiritual networks of relationships and practices" (Campbell 2010, p. 8):

> [R]eligious community represents a network of social relationships connected through a set of communal life practices. These practices are established through a shared history and maintained through a shared story shaped by religious language and understandings that provide the basis for collective meaning-making (Campbell 2010, p. 8).[12]

In this respect, Campbell convincingly argues that while individuals within the same religious tradition usually share certain beliefs and practices, "it is the specific grouping to which they belong that often dictates their rules of religious life" (Campbell 2010, p. 15). Accordingly, it is within the boundaries of a specific community that the specific choices and reactions to new media technologies are negotiated. As she puts it, "religious communities are unique in their negotiations with media due to the moral economies of these groups, and the historical and cultural settings in which they find themselves" (Campbell 2010, p. 58). I shall come back later to this conception of religious community. For now, the main takeaway is the acknowledgement that a study of the relationship between religion and media "involves asking questions about how technologies are conceived of, *as well as used*, in light of a religious community's beliefs, moral codes, and historical tradition of engagement with other forms of media technology" (Campbell 2010, p. 59, my emphasis).

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[12]   See Campbell 2005, pp. 21–40 for a detailed discussion.

To operationalize her theoretical stance, Campbell identifies four chief factors that shape the adoption of media technologies by a religious community: 1) the role of the history and tradition of the community with respect to media, in particular, its relationship to text; 2) the core beliefs and patterns of the community; 3) the community's position toward authority and its consequences for the negotiation process; and 4) the communal framing and discourse legitimizing the use, adaptation, or rejection of a new media technology (Campbell 2010, pp. 62–63; Hutchings 2017, pp. 203–209). The different aspects of this analytical framework can be fruitfully used to analyze the case of Jehovah's Witnesses. In the following, however, I will concentrate on the fourth of these factors – the way in which the Watch Tower Society frames the legitimate and illegitimate use of various media – and touch upon the other aspects only incidentally.

4 Framing the Use of Media Technology within the Watch Tower Society

Campbell distinguishes between three main discursive strategies to circumscribe the appropriate use of media technologies within religious communities. The first is what she calls a *prescriptive discourse* through which "religious individuals and groups laud the embrace of technology because of its ability to help fulfill a specific valued goal or practice", notably for its missionary work (Campbell 2010, p. 136). For instance, a prescriptive framing was developed to legitimize the use of the radio in the 1920s (Krüger & Rota 2015; Rota 2018). After presenting the new technology as the realization of a biblical prophecy,[13] the radio was pushed as a revolutionary way to spread God's message. Thus, a column in *The Watchtower* advised:

> The Lord has brought into action the radio, evidently for the purpose of giving a witness to the people. […] It would seem that each class, instead of spending large sums of money for halls, newspaper advertisements, handbills, etc., could better serve by conserving their money and arranging to broadcast the message of truth over some radio station.[14]

During the 1930s the Witnesses' use of the radio encountered rising resistance from various religious and public institutions, prompting the Society to reorient its missionary strategy away from this technology. Nevertheless, the Watch Tower Society's retrospective account of its broadcasting mostly glosses over these problems and presents its media history as a series of uninterrupted successes. The current adoption of the Internet as a central instrument in the service

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[13] See "Views from the Watch Tower [Radio Tells Millennium is Coming]." *The Watchtower*, June 15, 1922, Vol. XLIII, p. 180.
[14] "Efficient Service." *The Watchtower*, April 15, 1927, Vol. XLVIII, p. 127.

of its missionary work is directly linked with the earlier use of the radio (WTBTS 2014, pp. 72–74). The society's media historiography (Knox 2011), the publicity surrounding the recent Internet use, and the insistence on the growing circulation and translation of its magazines are all good examples of the second of Campbell's discursive strategies, *validating discourses*, through which religious groups demonstrate "how technologies validate group goals and serve as a way to affirm their communal identity" (Campbell 2010, p. 137).

The third framing strategy identified by Campbell is the *officializing discourse*, which "seeks not only to promote designated uses of technology but also to set defined boundaries for the use in terms of technological beliefs and social values" (Campbell 2010, p. 144). Numerous articles in the magazines *The Watchtower* and *Awake!*, as well as books, videos, and other online content published by the Watch Tower Society, involve such framing, which deserves closer scrutiny.

A cross-media analysis shows that the outright rejection of a medium is rare, and the publications usually mention the potential benefit one can derive from using different media. For instance, Felder (2016, pp. 23–25) notes that when discussing the topic of television, the magazine articles often present it as a means of reducing the distance between nations and people as well as a source of information about global events. From the 1950s to the 1980s, particular emphasis was also put on the educational potential of TV. Similarly, many articles discussing the topic of the Internet from the mid-1990s draw attention to its many useful aspects (Krüger & Rota 2015, pp. 100–101). Nevertheless, in most cases, the positive aspects of these and other media technologies are relativized by a stronger emphasis on the possible risks associated with their misuse (see Felder 2016, pp. 25–30 for the case of television), as the following example illustrates:

> ALL OVER THE WORLD, MILLIONS OF PEOPLE USE the Internet every day. Many log on to conduct business, to catch up on world news, to check the weather, to learn about different countries, to obtain travel information, or to communicate with family and friends in various parts of the world. But some – married and single adults as well as a surprising number of children – will be going on-line for a very different reason: TO LOOK AT PORNOGRAPHY.[15]

The potential drawbacks of using different media mentioned in the Watch Tower Society's publications are numerous. However, certain dangers are featured more prominently and consistently in relation to various media (Krüger & Rota 2015, pp. 99–104; Felder 2016, pp. 25–28, 35–36). Since the arguments are similar in their numerous iterations, a few selected examples will suffice to convey an idea of the dominant interpretative patterns.

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[15]   "Pornography Goes On-Line." *Awake!*, June 8, 2000, p. 3 (emphasis in original).

Being exposed to pornography or otherwise immoral content, as indicated in the previous example, is one of the most notable perils associated with the use of media. As the article quoted above argues, pornography "can seriously affect your quality of life, warp your judgment, damage your relationships with others and, most important, ruin your relationship with God". Thus, readers are warned: "Whether featured in a book or a magazine or online, pornography is not for Christians. Avoid it at all costs!"[16] The Watch Tower Society's publications similarly warn readers to avoid media portraying or discussing the sphere of the occult. Jehovah's Witnesses' theology underscores the influence of invisible beings in humans' everyday lives (Chryssides 2008, pp. 101–102). While God's angels protect people from spiritual harm, the rebellious angels, or demons who are on the side of Satan, seek to mislead them through various forms of spiritism. "The practice of spiritism", as one of the most popular publications of Jehovah's Witnesses explains, "is involvement with the demons, both in a direct way and through a human medium" (WTBTS, 2005, p. 100). Thus, a recent edition of *Awake!* features the following admonition:

> "*You cannot be partaking of 'the table of Jehovah' and the table of demons*." (1 Corinthians 10:21, 22) All who truly love Jehovah will stay away from books, movies, and computer games that are rooted in the occult or that promote occult practices and beliefs. "I shall not set in front of my eyes any good-for-nothing thing," says Psalm 101:3. What is more, occult entertainment often glorifies violence and immorality, which "lovers of Jehovah" repudiate.—Psalm 97:10.[17]

According to the theological views of the Watch Tower Society, the Devil also seeks to incite mankind to rebel against God. Thus, "[i]t is no coincidence that violence, often with occult themes, saturates the popular media".[18] Indeed, Satan "tries to estrange us from Jehovah by sowing a spirit of violence in our hearts, in part by way of questionable literature, movies, music, and computer games," and, for this reason, "[t]hose who cleave to Bible principles shield their mind and heart from all forms of entertainment that nurture a lust for violence".[19]

The consumption of inappropriate content, however, is not the only risk associated with media use. In the eyes of the Watch Tower Society, electronic media that invites interactive use can lead to dangerous associations. Many articles warn parents about the risks their children might incur when visiting chatrooms of online forums.[20] Additionally, young people are advised to be very

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[16] "Protect Yourself and Those You Love." *Awake!*, June 8, 2000, p. 10.
[17] "What Draws People to the Occult?" *Awake!*, February 2011, p. 6.
[18] "The Source of Evil Exposed!" *The Watchtower*, June 1, 2007, p. 6.
[19] "Let Jehovah's 'Saying' Safeguard You." *The Watchtower*, September 1, 2005, p. 29.
[20] See, e.g., "Beware of Internet Chat Rooms." *Awake!*, December 8, 2000, p. 20.

selective in their online friendships and to avoid bad company[21] and superficial relationships.[22] Still, even without connecting with other users, media can harm communication. By offering time-consuming forms of entertainment[23] and a constant flow of (often incorrect or misleading) information,[24] television, social media, and the Internet in general can distract from activities that contribute to one's spiritual well-being and can hinder contact with friends and family. Therefore, the Watch Tower Society warns: "[D]o not let attraction lead to 'addiction.' By 'making the best use of your time,' you can avoid misusing digital technology".[25]

This overview demonstrates that the publications of the Watch Tower Society make use of all three discursive strategies defined by Campbell. However, while the prescriptive and validating discourses are geared toward regulating the use of media in relation to religious practices, it is the organizing discourse that appears to have the most far-reaching consequences for Jehovah's Witnesses everyday interaction with media. What can we say on this matter?

5 Declared Media Use among Jehovah's Witnesses

Quantitative data on Jehovah's Witnesses' media use are scarce. In his groundbreaking study, *The Trumpet of Prophecy: A Sociology of Jehovah's Witnesses*, James Beckford surveyed the use of media among the members of ten British congregations (1975, pp. 142–144). However, his data, while interesting, are quite meager and ultimately inconclusive; furthermore, the data do not provide any information regarding newer media technologies, notably the Internet. To bridge this gap, in 2016, my colleagues at the University of Fribourg and I conducted, with the help of a group of students, a survey in four German-speaking assemblies of Jehovah's Witnesses in Switzerland, filling out a total of 183 questionnaires through face-to-face interviews.[26]

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[21]   See, e.g., the whiteboard animation video "Be Social-Network Smart,"
        https://www.jw.org/en/bible-teachings/teenagers/whiteboard-animations/social-network-smart/ (May 2018).
[22]   See, e.g., "Children Online—What Parents Should Know." *Awake!,* October 2008, p. 7.
[23]   See, e.g., "Let Nothing Distance You from Jehovah." *The Watchtower*, January 15, 2013, p. 15.
[24]   See, e.g., "Firmly Uphold Godly Teaching." *The Watchtower*, May 1, 2000, p. 8.
[25]   "Do You Use Digital Technology Wisely?" *Awake!*, April 2015, p. 15.
[26]   Our sample included 93 women and 89 men. The average age of the surveyed Jehovah's Witnesses was 47 years and the distribution of age cohorts was as follows: 5.5% 20-year-old or younger; 34.4% between the ages of 21 and 40; 35.5% between 41 and 60; 26.4% 61 or older.
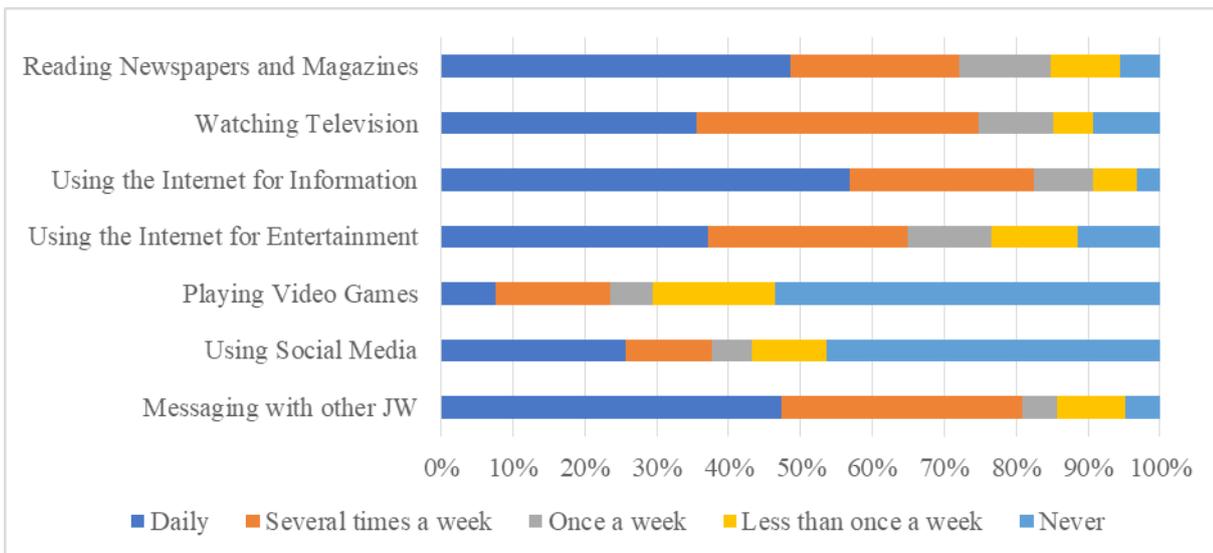
Figure 1: Frequency of Media Use (N=183)

The data collected reveal that 72% of the surveyed Jehovah's Witnesses read a mainstream newspaper or magazine on a regular basis. Furthermore, 75% declared that they watched television daily or several times a week. The Internet also belongs to the everyday media habits of most Witnesses, with 82.5% browsing it daily or several times a week to find information on various subjects – a datum that suggests Internet use in line with, if not slightly more frequent than, the national average.[27] Sixty-five percent surf online as often to look for entertainment. The use of video games is less widespread: only 29.5% of the surveyed Jehovah's Witnesses play video games at least once a week. This might be due in part to the average age of the people surveyed. It is worth noting, however, that this figure is still slightly higher than that pertaining to the Association of Evangelical Churches, which served as a contrast group in our project (see Krüger & Rota as well as Huber in this special issue), in which no more than 28% of the members played games on a weekly basis.[28] The use of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter is split into two uneven groups: 37.7% of the surveyed Witnesses affirm checking them daily or several times a week, while 46.5% never use them. By contrast, almost 86% of the respondents use WhatsApp or other messaging services to communicate with other Jehovah's Witnesses at least on a weekly basis.

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[27]   According to the Swiss Federal Office of Statistics, almost seventy-eight percent of the surveyed population uses the Internet daily or almost daily in all uses combined. See https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/de/home/statistiken/kultur-medien-informationsgesellschaft-sport/ informationsgesellschaft.assetdetail.4482185.html (May 2018).

[28]   The average age of the surveyed members of this association was 50 years. However, people over 60 are clearly less represented in this sample than in the sample of Jehovah's Witnesses.

On the whole, the warnings in the publications do not seem to deter the use of electronic media in general. However, the surveyed Witnesses largely share the concerns expressed in the Watch Tower Society's publications about the potential risks of browsing the Internet.
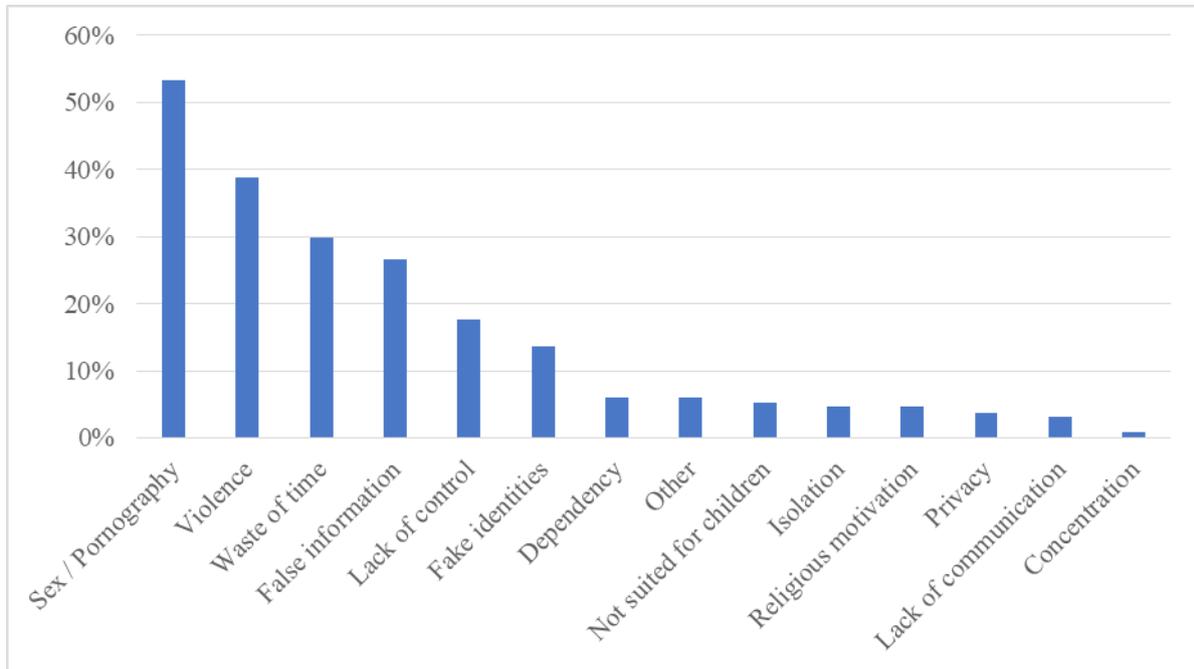
Figure 2: Dangers of the Internet for Children and Teens (N=131)

Pornography, violence, and wasting time are the three most cited dangers that the use of media in general can pose to children and teens.[29] Thus, from the quantitative data emerges the idea that the surveyed Jehovah's Witnesses do not reject media technology per se, but are concerned about its possible misuse. This view appears to be in line with the framing of media in the magazines and is confirmed by further data.

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[29]   The survey explicitly asked about the influence on children and teens, whom the magazines of the Watch Tower Society present as particularly vulnerable to the potentially harmful consequences of media use.
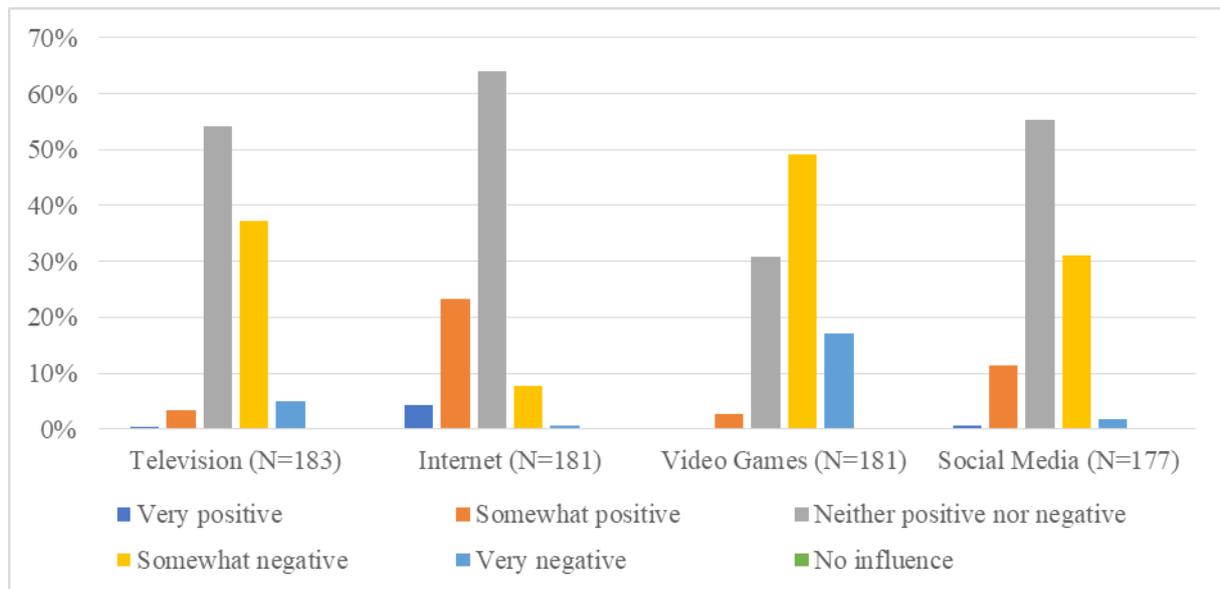
Figure 3: Influence of Media on Children and Teens

Accordingly, the surveyed Witnesses tend to remain ambivalent regarding the influence of different media on children and teens. Most of them consider that watching television, surfing the Internet, or using social media has neither a positive nor a negative influence on young users (54.1%, 64.1%, and 55.4%, respectively). Video games, which are perceived in a more negative light, represent the only outlier among electronic media. Still, about 30% of the surveyed Witnesses remain undecided regarding the potentially harmful effects of video games.

These results gain further coherence when compared with the qualitative data that my colleagues and I collected among Swiss and German Jehovah's Witnesses. For example, Lara,[30] a Swiss Witness in her twenties, mentions watching TV on a regular basis. The popular series *The Big Bang Theory*[31] is one of her favorite programs. Still, she would advise younger people to choose in advance what they wanted to watch on TV or the Internet, instead of zapping from one thing to another: "For instance, on YouTube," she says, "you can jump from one video to the other and, suddenly, you have lost an hour!" Lara is also skeptical of social media and offers the following explanation for why she does not have a Facebook or Twitter account:

> I don't like that [using social media]. I mean, on the one side it is definitely very convenient. It has benefits, and I don't want to push it aside. But for me, personally, it would certainly be time consuming, and I don't like the frivolity that often prevails there [on social media]. I don't want to

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[30]   All names used in this article are pseudonyms.
[31]   *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS, 2007–present) is an American TV sitcom series.

generalize, but there are many things that I consider superficial, such as when everyone posts "nice weather" […]. It's not my cup of tea.

While recognizing the possible advantages of social media, Lara does not trust herself to make wise use of the technology and, fearing she will waste her time, she prefers to refrain from using it.

Frank, a 40-year-old Jehovah's Witness from Germany, addresses the topic of video games. Frank was baptized as a Witness in the early 1990s. However, during a period of his life between his late twenties and early thirties, he distanced himself from the Watch Tower Society. In those years, he was a very active gamer, and was particularly engaged in the online role-playing game *World of Warcraft*. On the server where he played, he became, in his own words, "kind of a star". In 2007, Frank came back to the Jehovah's Witnesses and now regularly attends the semiweekly meetings. He still plays video games sometimes, but his attitude toward *World of Warcraft* has changed:

> The problem […] is the things one has to deal with. *World of Warcraft* is a fantasy world. […] And then there were also demons and ghosts and whatever. And then, that was it for me. OK, I don't want this anymore. […] *World of Warcraft* is infested with the occult. And at the beginning that wasn't clear to me. [But] it became clearer and clearer to me. […] That doesn't fit what I learn in the Bible.

Frank admits that it was not easy for him to quit playing *World of Warcraft*. At least five times a year, he says, he is tempted to install the game and see "what's going on". To this, he comments: "It is important to be disciplined. It is just a phase that lasts two days and as quick as it comes, it is also gone."

Finally, Jörg's comments bring home a similar point regarding television. He is a Swiss Jehovah's Witness in his sixties. For many years, he did not own a TV and, even though he now has one, he is less than enthusiastic about watching it:

> Nowadays you have about 150 TV channels. […] And you can browse 150 channels and just find things that … *pffff* [are not good]. A lot of crime thrillers, violence. And I am always wondering why people like these things […] and want to see them. Ah, it disgusts me. […] On TV we watch nature programs and sometimes you get a good movie like *Into the Wild.* […] Otherwise, the things shown in movies are violence, sex, conspiracies, corruption. […] I am not some kind of delicate flower in the corner [*keine Mimose dort am Rand*] but I don't need to watch those things. And my wife doesn't either. We'd rather discuss something together, or study something, for instance, in *The Watchtower*.

Nevertheless, Jörg would not say that watching TV is in itself harmful:

No, no, it is not harmful. You just have to get a handle on it [*im Griff haben*]. Something comes up and you say, "I don't need to see this." Some violence or some, ah [almost disgusted], science fiction movie. […] You know what's coming. And I have to make a distinction between what is useful to me and what brings me nothing. What can I watch? There's not much left. And when sometimes there's a nature movie […] then I think that's a good thing.

After reviewing so much empirical data, we can now ask ourselves how these findings contribute to our understanding of the dynamic relationship between religion, media, and community.

6 Religion, Media, and Community: A Provisional Appraisal

A comparison between the content of the publications and the quantitative and qualitative data collected among Swiss and German Jehovah's Witnesses indicates a remarkable consistency in the way different media and their use are framed and portrayed. In light of this finding, we might follow Campbell and define the *community* of Jehovah's Witnesses as a "'family of users' who create a distinctive 'moral economy' of social and religious meanings that guide their choices about technology and rules of interaction with them" (Campbell 2010, p. 58). This conception, however, remains fairly vague about the nature, production, and consequences of such a "distinctive moral economy". In this regard, Campbell only states that moral economies are "distinct spaces where symbolic-meaning transactions occur" and are created by "members choosing to come together into a shared space, be it physical or ideological space" (Campbell 2010, p. 58).[32] How does this gathering lead to the formation of a moral economy? How does the moral economy guide the religious users' choices? How does it shape their practices? And how should we understand the image of a family of users? In the following section, I will argue that to answer these questions and thus improve our understanding of the relationship between religion, media, and community in the case of Jehovah's Witnesses, we have to meet two related challenges: a methodological and a theoretical one.

The methodological problem concerns the status of the interview and survey data. Our first instinct might be to take these data at face value and analyze them as indicators of the actual practices of Jehovah's Witnesses. Indeed, at first sight, there is no ostensible reason for not doing so. However, this approach would imply a direct connection between media interpretation and media use. This "shortcut" is taken by a number of prominent scholars studying Jehovah's

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[32]   Elsewhere (2010, p. 51) Campbell describes 'moral economy' as the "interplay between moral-cultural beliefs and economic practices, often associated with tightly bounded communities where set moral values and strong social ties dictate choices related to material and social good".

Witnesses. Thus, Beckford (1975, p. 144) notes that, "many Witnesses revealed in the course of conversation that they were highly selective in their choice of programme. They were uniformly reluctant, moreover, to visit the cinema and to attend dance-halls." Similarly, in his ethnographic research in Britain, Holden (2002, p. 131) observes that "although Witnesses are by no means the only parents to worry about the possible effects of television on children's behaviour, the Society still issues an authoritarian warning against unsuitable television programmes". Then, directly after, he quotes a Jehovah's Witnesses married couple who confirmed to him they would only watch programs "that would be suitable for their own children and that portrayed behaviour that they, the parents, would allow to take place in their own homes" (Holden 2002, p. 131). Finally, in his authoritative presentation of the history of Jehovah's Witnesses, Chryssides states:

> Although Jehovah's Witnesses may make occasional visits to the cinema and theatre, they prefer outings to be congregational rather than individual, and in any case, the amount of sex and violence that is regularly on release *leaves little that they would wish to view* (Chryssides 2016, p. 175, my emphasis).

But is this really the case?

This question leads us to the theoretical problem regarding the conceptualization of a religious community. The idea implied in the scholarly assessments above is that Jehovah's Witnesses follow the Watch Tower Society's guidelines concerning the appropriate use of media.[33] A community, therefore, is implicitly conceived of as a sum of men and women, each individually having committed to a certain set of attitudes. According to this quite intuitive view, to say, for instance, that, as a community, Jehovah's Witnesses abhor violence in movies would mean that each member of the community – or at least most[34] – having assimilated the message conveyed in the publications, individually abhors violence in movies and acts in accordance with such an attitude.

In contrast to this summative attitude, a holistic account of a community would maintain that it is not each individual Witness who abhors violence in movies, but the *community* of Jehovah's Witnesses as such that does. *Prima facie*, however, such a change of perspective would necessarily seem to imply the existence of some dubious super-individual ontology, such as a group mind or a *conscience collective*.[35] In the following, I will argue that Margaret Gilbert's concept of plural

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[33] This representation fits a certain stereotypical image of Jehovah's Witnesses as a sectarian group that leaves no room for individual agency, an image that the authors quoted above otherwise carefully discuss and deconstruct.

[34] In this perspective, it is fair to assume that a diverging attitude of a minority of members would not compromise the existence of the group itself. See Gilbert 1987, pp. 186–187.

[35] Durkheim himself felt the need to address this problem, responding to his critics in his preface to the second edition of the *Rules of Sociological Method* (1901). See Durkheim 1982, pp. 34–47. The debate over the relationship between the individual and the collective levels in Durkheim's theory is not yet closed. See, e.g., Lukes 1973, pp. 8–15; Sawyer 2002.

subjects allows us to advance a non-summative conception of community that avoids such ontological pitfalls. To illustrate the potential applicability of such an approach, I will first present some empirical evidence that indicates the limits of a summative conception and demonstrates the need for a more complex understanding of the dynamics underlying the constitution and persistence of a religious community. Thereafter, I will outline Gilbert's philosophical account.

7 Conflicting Attitudes

The first empirical case concerns Emma and Ralph, a married couple of Swiss Jehovah's Witnesses in their forties living in a village of the Swiss Plateau. When asked about his television-watching habits, Ralph states that he is "rather passionate about the news and documentary films". As for his wife, he implies, she has other preferences, but he would rather let her explain, which leads to the following exchange between the two:

> **Emma**: Other things [television programs]. [Laughs.]
> **Ralph**: What kinds of things? [Laughs.]
> **Emma** [emotionally]: Crime thrillers! [Laughs.] Oh! [addressing the interviewer] You are recording that now? [Laughs.]
> **Ralph**: Yes, that is recorded.

In the following conversation, Emma details her taste for crime thrillers. She explains that in addition to the popular German television series *Tatort*,[36] she enjoys watching English and Swedish crime thrillers, before inquiring again, "Eh! That's anonymous, right?"

In this interaction, Emma expresses a preference regarding media content that contrasts with the views put forward in the magazines of the Watch Tower Society. At the same time, her reaction reveals her unease when imagining that her statements might be made public. Commenting on his wife's reaction, Ralph notes that Jehovah's Witnesses have their flaws and weakness, too:

> This also shows that we are no saints. Everyone has his preferences and enjoys watching something. Personally, I also enjoy watching a disaster movie. Perhaps that does not fit the concept of Jehovah's Witnesses when one looks from the outside. But we are a community that goes to the movies.

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[36] *Tatort* (literally: 'crime scene') is a police procedural television series (Das Erste, 1970–present) produced and broadcast by various networks in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. Each episode takes place in a different city in one of these countries.

In this statement, Ralph seeks to minimize what from the outside might be perceived as deviance. On the one hand, he stresses that Jehovah's Witnesses are not barred from going to the movies; on the other, he notes that to indulge in certain forms of entertainment is also 'human'. His remarks prompt a new exchange between the couple:

> **Ralph**: We should also live. […] Everyone has his preferences, and they are also part of our lives. There is nothing wrong with that. Of course, we must be somewhat careful […] if we go around preaching the love of Jehovah God and at home we watch a movie portraying a mass shooting ['*s Geballer*], you know…
>
> **Emma**: That wouldn't be so believable.
>
> **Ralph**: Our credibility might be slightly questioned if somebody should ask or get to know what kind of movies we watch.
>
> **Emma**: Or everything with an esoteric content. That is also taboo for us. […] Because we know that we are observed. The people do not just listen to what we say but observe us.

The couple's assertions draw attention to a distinction between their public behavior as preachers of God's message and certain personal attitudes that might be perceived as incompatible with that behavior. The general public implied in Emma's and Ralph's last statements appears to be the world of non-Witnesses that surrounds them. Emma's preoccupation with her anonymity, however, also suggests a concern that other people might recognize her by her name. A second case will allow us to explore this aspect in a comparative perspective.

During an interview, Helena, a 45-year-old living in a Swiss city, describes her media habits. Helena subscribes to a daily newspaper and to a Sunday paper, and watches various news and current affairs shows on television. On Sunday evenings, she usually watches an episode of *Tatort*. Watching TV is also a regular activity in her family life:

> As a family, every Friday evening we divide in two groups and my husband watches something with one of the children and I watch something with the other. We have said, this is a kind of mommy and daddy time, and they can say what they want to do with us. And they want to watch TV. […] They can choose a film and then we watch it together. And I always like to discuss the movie for a moment – not just watch the movie and then, "Bye-bye, see you", but rather, "What happened? What did you like?" or something like that for a moment.

In addition to movies, she started watching the TV series *Breaking Bad* and *House of Cards* as a family activity.[37] Helena recognizes that these choices might seem surprising and notes:

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37   The TV series *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008–2013) narrates the struggles of a chemistry teacher turned criminal and his career in the violent world of drug trafficking. *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013–2018) is a political thriller

Well, I watch it now. If someone else does not watch it, that is OK. Now, I don't think that *Tatort* is that bad but, yes, *Breaking Bad* is probably somewhat at the limit. My younger son is not allowed to watch it. That's clear. Yeah. But, well, I wouldn't go and tell my congregation, "Hey, I watch *Breaking Bad*." I mean, you have some idea of who might also watch it, and you know with whom you can talk about such things.

Helena's statement shows that she knows her private media habits do not correspond to the expectation of the Watch Tower Society and therefore she would refrain from mentioning them in a communal setting. At the same time, she is also aware that other Jehovah's Witnesses do watch similar TV series while also refraining from mentioning it openly at the congregational meetings, and she feels like she can share her viewing experiences with them, at least privately.

In sum, when it comes to their individual media use, Helena, Emma, and Ralph are evidently not always guided by the moral and religious framing conveyed by the Watch Tower Society's literature. Furthermore, Emma's embarrassment and Helena's secrecy manifestly reveal their awareness that they are doing something they should not. Finally, they recognize, at least implicitly, that their fellow Jehovah's Witnesses (or at least some of them) would have a standing to rebuke them should they find out about their favorite series.

In light of these considerations, it might be tempting to analyze their statements in a normative sense. In this way of thinking, Emma and Helena might be considered 'bad' or 'incomplete' Jehovah's Witnesses who have not yet fully assimilated the beliefs and moral system of the group. Or perhaps they would be regarded as weak or faulty members of the group who lack the willpower to act on their beliefs. These positions may well describe the attitude of the community toward them[38] and, indeed, seem to somewhat grasp the self-representation that some interviewees have of themselves.[39] However, they do not really advance our theoretical understanding of the dynamic nature of a religious community. To move forward, I advocate approaching the community of Jehovah's Witnesses as a *plural subject* in Margaret Gilbert's sense.

8 Plural Subjects and Joint Commitment

What is a plural subject? In a nutshell, a plural subject is a group of people jointly committed to intend something as a single body – that is, to emulate, by virtue of the actions of all, a single

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portraying a Washington congressman's rise to power through intimidation, violence, and corruption.
[38] This, however, remains an empirical question that cannot be simply settled through speculation.
[39] This seems to be the case of Emma and Ralph, who both admit to their flaws and weaknesses while trying to live their faith in a way that allows them "to stand with good conscience before God" (Emma).

intentional agent (e.g., Gilbert 2014a, p. 7). To unpack this idea, it is worth starting with an illustrative example in the form of a thought experiment.[40] The example proceeds by first demonstrating the limits of a summative account for the definition of a group and then introducing a non-summative account.

Let us imagine a single person, John, reading a poem and finding it very moving. John is in a room with other people reading the same poem. The mere physical proximity of the people in the room or the fact that they are reading the same text does not seem to provide grounds for considering them a group or community in any intuitive sense.[41] This conclusion would not change even if we assume that all the readers personally believe that the poem is moving, for their attitude remains private. Would the situation be different if each of them had expressed their attitude openly to the others? That is, if the way each of them feels about the poem had become common knowledge among all of them? According to Gilbert, the answer must be negative. While each person would know what the other readers individually believe, "the fact that a *group* is involved does not play any obviously essential role in what is going on" (Gilbert 1987, p. 189). As Gilberts notes, "An analogue of group belief exists in many populations which are not intuitively social groups. It is probably common knowledge in the population of adults who have red hair and are over six feet tall that most of them believe that fire burns, for instance" (Gilbert 1987, p. 189). Thus, the summative account presented so far would be compatible with a set-theoretical approach to collective phenomena,[42] but it seems only accidentally to refer to a phenomenon involving a group.

Following Gilbert, however, we can imagine a different situation. This time, John and the other readers meet at Jane's house to talk poetry. After having read the poem aloud, they discuss its merits and conclude that the poem is very moving. A few moments later, Jane's husband (who did not participate in the discussion) enters the room, and asks if the poem is interesting, to which Jane replies, "It is quite dull." We can imagine on hearing this statement John would retort, "But we thought it was very moving!" In this situation, John's rebuke would appear to be justified on grounds that cannot be accounted for on the basis of a summative conception of a group (Gilbert 1987, pp. 192–193). What has changed concerning the situation sketched above is that through their communicative practice, the people convened at Jane's house have decided to "let a certain interpretation 'stand' in the context of their discussion" as an attitude that can be ascribed "to the group as a whole" (Gilbert 1987, p. 191). John's standing to rebuke Jane "appears to be understood

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[40]   This particular illustration is a simplified version of an example offered by Gilbert in 1987, complemented with further insights discussed in Gilbert 1996a.

[41]   Compare this example with the passengers on a train carriage reading the same journal.

[42]   I would like to thank Boris Rähme for pointing out this analogy during the workshop "Religion and New Media".

as grounded *directly* in the existence of a group view that contradicts what the speaker says" (Gilbert 1987, p. 193).[43]

In line with Gilbert's terminology, we can say that the people participating in the poetry discussion have jointly accepted a certain attitude as that of their group and are thus jointly committed to upholding this attitude as a body. As such, they constitute the plural subject of that commitment. Furthermore,

> It is understood that when a set of persons jointly accepts that *p* [where *p* is any propositional content], then each of the individuals involved is personally obligated to act appropriately. Such action consists, roughly, in not publicly denying that *p* or saying or doing anything which presupposes its denial (Gilbert 1987, pp. 194–195).

Thus, the creation of a joint commitment entails important corollaries (Gilbert 2008). First, as we have already seen, it creates a set of mutual rights and obligations. Each party in a plural subject is now entitled and obligated to behave in a certain way "*qua* a member of the whole" (Gilbert 1996a, p. 186). A violation of these obligations constitutes grounds for rebuke. Second, individual members cannot unilaterally break their joint commitment by simply changing their minds because they are not individually the subject of the commitment they are revising. It is the group that constitutes the plural subject of such a commitment (Gilbert 2000).[44] Thus, an individual can abandon a joint commitment without fault only if the other persons have waived their rights to the conforming action. Third, the joint commitment would still hold – and its plural subject would continue to exist – even if one or more of the parties should no longer *personally* share the attitude that the group has jointly accepted. Indeed, we can imagine that, in the meantime, John has revised his personal attitude and now also considers the poem in question to be quite dull. (Indeed, he might have had this opinion from the beginning, but being, say, shy or a conformist, he has refrained from stating it.) Nevertheless, when he rebukes Jane, he speaks for the group. Thus, Gilbert draws this radical conclusion:

> *[I]t is not a necessary condition of a group's belief that p* [i.e., a given propositional content] *that most members of the group believe that p.* Indeed, given the above it seems that *it is not necessary that any members of the group personally believe that p* (Gilbert 1987, p. 191, emphasis in original).

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[43]   The adverb "directly" serves to emphasize that such a right to rebuke is based neither on moral nor on prudential reasons. See Gilbert 2014b for a more detailed discussion of the nature of this standing.

[44]   Contrast the case of a joint commitment with the case of an individual commitment. If I decide to go to the theater tonight, I commit myself to a certain course of action (for instance, I will not go out of town for the evening). However, since I am the subject of my commitment, I can rescind it by a simple change of mind (see Bratman 1999 for a more nuanced discussion of this point). However, this would not be possible for me if you and I were jointly committed to going to the theater *together*.

At this point, it is important to avoid some common misunderstandings. Gilbert's conclusion does not mean that personal and joint attitudes *never* converge – just that they do not *necessarily* have to. In this sense, a plural subject cannot be simply reduced to individual intentions, and yet, it does not constitute a new metaphysical reality. Accordingly, Gilbert's thesis does not seek to provide a measure of the *intensity* of individual commitments, but rather to specify the *form* of commitment – i.e., a *joint* commitment – at the core of group-building processes.

This theoretical discussion allows us to see the empirical cases of the previous section in a new light and to consider Emma, Ralph, and Helena as parties in a plural subject, jointly committed to abhorring violence in movies independent of their personal attitudes on the matter. To support this view, however, we still have to identify the circumstances under which the interviewed Jehovah's Witnesses could have entered into such a joint commitment. Gilbert emphasizes that joint commitments are an essential element of everyday life, and a simple exchange between two people is sufficient to create one (Gilbert 1996a, p. 184). All it takes is for the parties to express their readiness to be jointly committed with the others concerning certain intentional content (Gilbert 1989, pp. 180–184; Gilbert 2006, pp. 138–140). With respect to our empirical case, however, I maintain that the parties entered a joint commitment in a ritual setting that involves the ritual use of media.[45] It is to such a setting that I now turn.

9 Ritualized Use of Media

Jehovah's Witnesses are openly invited to use the publications of the Watch Tower Society to deepen their understanding of the Bible. The study of these publications, however, is not only an individual activity but also, and foremost, a communal activity taking place at the congregation meetings organized semi-weekly at Kingdom Halls (Jehovah's Witnesses' places of assembly) around the world. During the weekend, each congregation meets for a public Bible discourse and then reviews an article from *The Watchtower*. In a second meeting, on a weekday, the congregation receives instruction on the basis of various publications to organize their missionary work and improve their rhetorical and teaching skills. Until December 2008, a third meeting devoted to the

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[45] The following discussion bears an important resemblance to Roy Rappaport's theory of ritual (see Rappaport 1999, pp. 107–138). However, there are also fundamental distinctions. In particular, Rappaport's theory, which draws on Austin's and Searle's analysis of speech acts (see Austin 1952; Searle 1969), is predicated on the exchange of individual commitments, whereas Gilbert's standpoint introduces the idea of a single *joint* commitment to accept a proposition as a body (see Gilbert 1996b). For reasons of space, I cannot discuss this distinction here, but see Rota (in preparation).

study of a Watch Tower Society's book was held weekly in smaller groups at private locations. This meeting has since been integrated into the midweek program.[46]

The magazines, books, and, since 2012, the multimedia content published on the website jw.org play a fundamental structuring role in each meeting (Blanchard 2006, pp. 55–57; Blanchard 2008, pp. 110–115; Rota 2018). The program of each encounter is communicated well in advance to all members through the various publications and is the same worldwide.[47] The announcement includes the detailed list of articles, book chapters, and videos that will be studied each week. Since the early years of the organization, the way of interacting with the publications also became increasingly standardized. Already under Russell, the Watch Tower Society started publishing questions to guide the study of the book series *Millennial Dawn*. From 1922 onward, the articles in the *Watchtower* became a regular object of study and, since 1942, the magazine prints questions pertaining to each paragraph at the bottom of selected articles (WTBTS 2014, pp. 173–174).

During the congregational meetings, these questions are used to conduct a review of the articles in the form of a question-and-answer session. The congregational study of other publications is patterned on the *Watchtower* study. Our participant observation in several Swiss and German congregations indicates the following basic structure:[48] First, a member of the congregation reads a paragraph from the *Watchtower* or another publication (depending on the meeting) aloud from the stage. Then, another member asks the public in attendance to answer one or two questions related to that passage, as reported in the publication. The participants in the assembly can raise their hands to answer the question. One name is called from the stage and that person receives a microphone so everyone can hear his or her answer. After a few answers have been collected, the congregation moves on to the next paragraph.

Although the answers may appear spontaneous, it does not take long for observers to notice that most answers are more or less elaborate paraphrases of the text read from the stage a few moments previously, which is no mere coincidence. In its publications, on its website, and even in its instructive cartoons for children, the Watch Tower Society[49] encourages Jehovah's Witnesses to

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[46] See "New Congregation Meeting Schedule." *Our Kingdom Ministry*, October 2008, 1; see also WTBTS 2014, pp. 174–176.

[47] The centralized production and distribution of media played a fundamental role in the global standardization of the meetings (see Blanchard 2008, pp. 151–160). Improvement in the printing and translation processes since the mid-1970s allowed the Watch Tower Society to publish an increasing number books and magazines simultaneously in different languages. For instance, by 1985, *The Watchtower* was published simultaneously in about 20 languages, by 1992 in 66, and today in 337 (see WTBTS 1993, p. 598).

[48] Through various publications, the organization regularly provides formal recommendations and instructions regarding how to conduct these study sessions. Here I prefer to draw from observational data.

[49] See, e.g., WTBTS 2012, lesson 9, and the above-mentioned animated video (June 4, 2018): https://www.jw.org/en/bible-teachings/children/become-jehovahs-friend/videos/prepare-your-comment-meetings/

prepare for each meeting carefully by reading the publications, looking in the text for answers to the given questions, making notes, and preparing a brief comment in one's own words.

To better understand the significance of this process for the constitution of a joint commitment among participants in the meeting, let us consider a concrete example from the book *Keep Yourselves in God's Love* (WTBTS 2008), first used in a congregation study in 2009. In a chapter entitled "How to Choose Wholesome Entertainment", the readers are admonished to "abhor what is wicked". After noting that the entertainment offer can be broadly divided into forms of entertainment that Christians definitely avoid and others they may or not find appropriate, the texts examines the first category:

> [S]ome forms of entertainment highlight activities expressly condemned in the Bible. Think, for example, of websites as well as movies, TV programs, and music that have sadistic or demonic content or that contain pornography or promote vile, immoral practices. Since such degraded forms of entertainment portray, in a positive light, activities that violate Bible principles or break Bible laws, they should be shunned by true Christians (WTBTS 2008, p. 56).

The following question appears as a footnote to guide the communal discussion of this passage: "What forms of entertainment do we reject, and why?" (WTBTS 2008, p. 56). The answer to such a question in the public setting of a congregation's meeting not only amounts to a statement recognizing a certain state of affairs, but can be viewed as a speech act through which the speaker commits himself or herself to upholding a normative attitude toward certain forms of media entertainment (Searle 1964; Rappaport 1999, pp. 107–138). However, I would argue that the commitment in question is not an individual one, but rather a *joint* one. In this respect, it is worth noting that while other personal pronouns appear in the organization's publications, the "we" form is frequently used in the formulation of the study questions. By providing a response to the question in the plural form, the person answering outlines an attitude for the group and signals his or her readiness to enter a joint commitment with the other participants to uphold an attitude. The other participants tacitly do the same by refraining from challenging the collective position encapsulated in the answer. In this way, the members of the congregation are constituted as the plural subject of the attitude and are jointly committed to upholding it as a single body independent of their private attitudes on the matter.

10 Conclusion

Margaret Gilbert's theory of joint commitment and its application to the analysis of empirical data concerning the organization of Jehovah's Witness allow us to put forward a more nuanced conception of religious community and of the role of media in its constitution. Gilbert maintains that

> In order for individual human beings to form collectivities, they must take on a special character, a "new" character, in so far as they need not, *qua* human beings, have that character. Moreover, humans must form a whole or unit of a special kind, a unit of a kind that can now be specified precisely: they must form a plural subject (Gilbert 1989, p. 431).

Accordingly, a set of individuals each having the same attitude provides neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition to constitute a group in any strong sense; in fact, not even a set of individuals each personally feeling that they belong to a group would seem to make the cut. In a similar way, a family of users gathered on the basis of similar individual media use does not yet constitute a unit of any special kind. Rather, the creation of such a unit requires the formation of a joint commitment, which can be achieved through a ritual means. Thus, following Gilbert (1986, p. 195), I would argue that "any set of persons who jointly accept some proposition thereby become a social group or collectivity, intuitively […] if they were not one before".

It is worth noting that Heidi Campbell closely associates the creation of a moral economy with a series of negotiation processes that can be interpreted as conducive to a joint commitment. However, in line with her research interests, her analysis places particular emphasis on the negotiation between religious groups and leaders and particular *media*, drawing attention to how such media are subjected to different rules to fit the moral order of the community. In this case, the community is considered to be preexisting; it is presupposed a priori. However, I would argue that the community is also generated by the imposition of such rules on how media should be used.[50] To invoke a distinction introduced by John Searle (1996), the rules in question are not regulative rules by which a community regulates its use of media, but constitutive rules by which the community constitutes itself *as a community*. These rules are not like those at a theme park forbidding its guests to dive into a pool (which presupposes the existence of the theme park); they are more like the rules of chess, without which chess would not exist.[51]

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[50] I am not claiming here that the rules specifically concerning *the use of media* are in some way central to the constitution of a group. The point is rather that the analysis of these rules allows us to discuss, *exempli gratia*, the central process in the constitution of a collective – i.e., the creation of a joint commitment.

[51] Such rules are not only outlined in organizing discourses, but can be reproduced by prescribing or validating frames as well. I am grateful to Heidi Campbell for her feedback on this point during a workshop in Trent, in May 2018.

In the empirical case discussed in this contribution, the constitutive rules in force shape the attitudes of the plural subject of Jehovah's Witnesses and provide grounds for policing the public behavior and discourse of the parties in such a plural subject. However, as long as such constitutive rules are not publicly challenged, diverging personal attitudes remain possible and, as the empirical data suggest, are tacitly known and tolerated by at least some of the members. From a methodological point of view, this indicates that "simply asking people for an opinion on some issue may well not be enough to elicit a personal belief" (Gilbert 1987, p. 196), as a person might answer in his or her capacity as a participant in a plural subject.

In this respect, I must stress that by pointing out the possibility of discrepancies between the collective and individual attitudes among Jehovah's Witnesses, I am not implying that none of the Witnesses has personal feelings and intentions that support his or her involvement in the group; I am only indicating that such a convergence of personal and collective attitudes is not a logical necessity for the existence of the group. Nor am I suggesting that these discrepancies are the result of coercion or hypocrisy of any kind. In fact, I would argue that the arguments of hypocrisy or coercion apply only if we assume that the existence of a religious community depends on the corresponding individual intentions of the members. While this might be a normative expectation of the community, it need not be part of our theoretical understanding of the actual dynamics of such a community.

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Religion on Twitter

Communalization in Event-Based Hashtag Discourses

Mirjam Aeschbach and Dorothea Lüddeckens

Abstract

In this article, we examine the question of religious communalization on the micro-blogging service Twitter. Twitter has only relatively recently been adopted as a field of research by scholars of media and religion, and the question of religious community building on Twitter has yet to be addressed. Along with conceptualizations of Twitter as a social network and a social medium, we present specific approaches to community and the emergence of communal identity. Drawing on theories of community building online as well as offline, this study emphasizes mediated communication as central in the formation of community. Finally, through an analysis of postings under the hashtag #WhatBritishMuslimsReallyThink, we outline how Twitter is used for event-based communication and emotional affiliation. In this way, Twitter is conceptualized as a digital space in which fleeting communities may emerge in the process of communicative event communalization.

Keywords

Twitter; Social media; Digital religion; Community

1 Introduction

"An Inconvenient Truth: What British Muslims Really Think." Thus reads the title of an article published in the *Sunday Times*[1] on April 10, 2016. The article was written by Trevor Phillips, former

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[1] With a circulation per issue averaging 767,016 in 2016, the *Sunday Times* is among the top 10 best-selling newspapers in Britain (Audit Bureau of Circulations, accessed October 3, 2016, http://www.abc.org.uk/). Furthermore, statistics indicate that, in the year 2016, around 6.5 million people were reached by the *Sunday Times* or its website (Statista, accessed August 13, 2018, https://www.statista.com/statistics/386877/the-times-the-sunday-times-monthly-reach-in-the-uk/). The article was published both in the print and online versions of the *Sunday Times*.

chairman of the British Commission for Racial Equality. As a well-known public figure, Phillips advocates the necessity of immigrants to assimilate to 'British values' and opposes multiculturalism, which he sees as having "led to isolated communities, in which some people think special separate values ought to apply" (Kundnani 2007, p. 27). Moreover, he has argued that Muslim values and practices, particularly with regard to the veil (Khiabany & Williamson 2008, p. 81), are in stark contrast to "what being British is about" (Kundnani 2007, p. 27). In the article "An Inconvenient Truth," Phillips presents himself as the one who "played a principal role in the creation of UK laws against religious discrimination [and who] first introduced the term Islamophobia to Britain" (Phillips 2016, p. 2), thereby pre-empting potential criticism. He further argues that, while "they [Muslims] seemed no different from the rest of us […] that just isn't how it is" (2016, p. 1). According to Phillips, this was revealed by a survey commissioned by Channel 4[2] "to get a better understanding of British Muslims' attitudes to living in Britain [and to] social issues including gender equality, homosexuality and issues relating to freedom of expression and the degree of sympathy for the use of violence and terrorist acts".[3] In his article, Phillips demarcates the boundaries of British national belonging along these lines, i.e., along assumed values regarding freedom, sexuality and gender, and the use of violence. He thereby presents Muslims as "a nation within a nation" (Phillips 2016, p. 2) and as a potential threat in terms of terrorism as well as gendered violence.[4]

This focus on Islam as "a dangerous cultural 'other' and as a potential 'enemy within'" as well as on questions "about the 'loyalty and belonging' of Muslims living in Britain" (Moore, Mason & Lewis 2008, p. 6) has been identified as a frequent staple in British print media outlets (Meer, Dwyer & Modood 2010; Moore, Mason & Lewis 2008). New media technologies have been conceptualized as potentially allowing "for connectivity and interactivity [that] can be harnessed for countering dominant representations [and] enhancing dialogue" (Poole & Richardson 2010, p. 6). This study focuses on how British Muslims use social media, and particularly the social media platform Twitter, as a means to engage with the contents published in the *Sunday Times*.

Launched in 2006, Twitter was introduced as a platform where user-generated content could be published in the form of microposts ('tweets') of a maximum of 140 characters,[5] which can be

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[2]   Channel 4 subsequently aired a documentary called *What British Muslims Really Think*, on April 13, 2016, starring Trevor Phillips as the narrator. The article in the *Sunday Times* was intended to introduce and promote the documentary and its contents.

[3]   Channel 4, accessed August 10, 2018, http://www.channel4.com/info/press/news/c4-survey-and-documentary-reveals-what-british-muslims-really-think.

[4]   For an in-depth analysis of the contents and strategies of identification applied in the article, see Aeschbach (2018).

[5]   In 2017, Twitter increased its limit from 140 to 280 characters (Ahmed 2018).

accessed, retweeted,[6] and replied to (via Twitter's @mention syntax).[7] With presently more than 335 million monthly users worldwide,[8] Twitter is one of the most influential social media platforms and an important social communication channel (Pfaffenberger 2016, p. 13). While in the beginning users mostly published insights into their everyday lives, Twitter increasingly started to be used as a tool for event-following and served not only as a source for real-time information, but also as a space for debates around specific issues derived from politics, news, and entertainment (Bruns 2011, p. 1; Weller et al. 2014, p. xxx).[9] It thereby functions as a back channel to social events and public (media) discussions (Bruns & Burgess 2012, p. 802; Rogers 2014, p. xvi) by providing its users with a platform to react to information and events and by allowing their reactions to potentially be received outside Twitter itself, for example when established print media take up Twitter discussions (Pfaffenberger 2016, pp. 14–15).

The *Sunday Times* article, "An Inconvenient Truth", triggered the creation of the hashtag #WhatBritishMuslimsReallyThink (abbreviated in this article as #WBMRT) on Twitter, with which Twitter users reacted to the exclusionary rhetoric in Trevor Phillips's article. Hashtags[10] facilitate the emergence of discussions on certain topics and events by marking tweets as relevant to the respective topic or event and thereby bundling them together (Bruns & Burgess 2011, p. 5). When recognizing Twitter for its potential to 'talk back', hashtags in particular have been used to contest social discrimination and marginalization (Konnelly 2015, p. 1). In this way, according to Bruns and Burgess (2011, p. 5), the users engaging in communication around a specific hashtag form an ad hoc 'community of interest' or a 'hashtag community'.

The question of community and communitization on the Internet is one of the "greatest challenges for the formation of theories in religious studies and sociology of knowledge of our time" (Krüger 2012, p. 428). This article aims to address this challenge by discussing the potential emergence of community on Twitter using the hashtag #WBMRT as an example of communicative event communalization in a digital public space. After discussing the current state of research in the

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[6] Retweeting is a well-established practice on Twitter whereby users republish and redistribute original messages. The author of the original tweet is always indicated with the syntax 'RT@username [original message]' (Bruns & Moe 2014, p. 22).

[7] Twitter's syntax supports the use of @mentions or @replies (consisting of the @ character followed by the name of the individual user mentioned). By using these textual markers, users mentioned in tweets will be notified directly of any tweets mentioning them or replying to one of their tweets.

[8] This number refers to the second quarter of 2018 as measured by the statistical portal Statista, accessed August 13, 2018, https://www.statista.com/statistics/282087/number-of-monthly-active-twitter-users/.

[9] It has been argued that in order to possibly encourage this "move from an ego to a reporting machine" (Rogers 2014, p. xvi), Twitter changed its tagline in 2009 and users, whose tweets had to that point in time been guided by the question "What are you doing?" were now asked "What's happening?"

[10] Hashtags consist of keywords preceded by the hash symbol (#) (Bruns & Moe 2014, p. 17). Hashtagged words that become widespread may become 'trending topics', a term used for hashtags identified as popular by a Twitter algorithm. The hashtag #WBMRT was marked as such a trending topic.

area of religion on Twitter, we will present the theoretical framework on community and community building on Twitter, drawing on the differentiation between Twitter as a social network and as a social medium (Murthy 2012, 2013), and introduce a communication-based approach to community building. Based on these considerations, we will analyze the hashtag #WBMRT in order to enrich the theoretical framework with empirical evidence and conceptualize Twitter as a digital space in which fleeting communities may emerge in the process of communicative event communalization.

2 State of Research: Religion on Twitter

Previous reflections on religion on Twitter derive largely from work on practical theology in the Anglo-American world. Studies by Clark (2014), Van den Berg (2014), and Williamson (2013), for example, examine the possibilities of Twitter as a tool for spreading religious content.[11] Similarly, O'Lynn investigates how social media may be effectively used to further religious education (2018). Yust, Hyde and Ota understand social media as a means of connecting and establishing social belonging, which they define as a "key theme for spiritual development" (2010, p. 291). Communication scholar Pauline Cheong refers to a series of texts on Twitter as a pedagogical tool "to reinforce the theme of […] Sunday lesson[s]" in evangelical churches or "to maintain relational connectedness beyond the boundaries of established institutional practices" (2010). Drawing on statements by church practitioners, Cheong conceptualizes so-called 'faith tweets'[12] as micro-blogging rituals that lead to a "sense of closeness and religious connected presence among the distributed family of faith believers" (Cheong 2010). This approach is based on "cyber-ritual as performative utterances [that] restructure and reintegrate the minds and emotions of their participants" (Cheong 2010), which leads to strengthening the already existing religious communities. In many of the studies outlined, the assumed media impact is based on expectations of religious actors in the field, such as Christian preachers, who use Twitter pedagogically. While the presupposition of this effectiveness calls for further investigation, scholars in the field of media reception have shown that social media is used to perform religious rituals and potentially share an (emotional) connection.[13]

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[11] The use of Twitter for spreading religious content is also analyzed from a media-scientific perspective by Boyle in his study of the Twitter presence of the *Mormon Times* (2012).

[12] Examples of faith tweets are those that include the hashtag #pray4me, which is used to describe a problem or issue other Twitter users are invited to pray for (Cheong 2010).

[13] In their study of the tweeting behavior revolving around Michael Jackson's death, where Twitter was used as a public space for mourning and commemoration, Sanderson and Cheong further deepen the approach to ritual practice via Twitter and show that rituals are used to communicate shared feelings (2010, p. 337).

In addition, other studies ask about religious individuals and their tweeting behavior. Chen, Weber and Okulicz-Kozaryn (2014) and Nguyen and Lim (2014) use a quantitative approach to collect information on religious individuals on Twitter. Both studies identify religious individuals on the basis of their self-designation in their short biographies and other profile characteristics, such as particularities of the language used in tweets. In one of the most prominent studies of religion on Twitter, a quantitative 'sentiment analysis' was conducted to compare tweets of Christians to those of atheists. As a result, the study established that Christians present themselves as happier in their tweeting activity (Ritter, Preston & Hernandez 2014).[14] In contrast to these attempts to quantify the religious presence on Twitter, not many qualitative studies have yet been carried out on the religious self-representation of Twitter users. Only the study by Wills and Fecteau (2016), "Humor and Identity on Twitter: #muslimcandyheartrejects as a Digital Space for Identity Construction", deals with the formation of (collective) identity and belonging on Twitter as a social medium. They base their analysis of tweets on humor as a means to communicatively build and reinforce a Muslim diaspora identity. In this way, collective identity (and therefore potentially community) is understood as built through communicatively performed and interactively affirmed identity positions. Further research on religious communities on Twitter and community building via micro-blogging is still lacking.

Lastly, some researchers have dealt with the topic of religious authority on Twitter. Genovese (2017), Guzek (2015), Narbona (2016), and Salazar, Pascual, and Gascon (2016), for example, investigate the Twitter presence and tweeting behavior of Pope Francis,[15] focusing on the content and categorization of individual tweets by goal, topic, and audience. A similar approach is used by Morehouse (2015), who broadens his scope to include the tweeting behavior of religious leaders other than the Pope. Finally, in her research, Cheong examined Twitter feeds by Christian megachurch leaders in order to identify the multiple ways in which scripture is featured in their tweets (2014). Her findings imply that, while digital media has often been conceptualized as disruptive and threatening for traditional and institutionalized authority, Twitter may also be supportive of religious authority and may even have an enhancing effect on authority structures (2014, pp. 4–15). In her most recently published article on religious authority in new media settings,

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[14]   The profiles analyzed were, however, selected on the basis of the followership of certain public figures. In this way, the followers of five Christian authority figures (e.g., Pope Francis, Joyce Meyer, etc.) and five atheist authority figures (e.g., Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, etc.) were identified as 'Christians' or 'Atheists' respectively (Ritter, Preston & Hernandez 2014, p. 244). Since most of the atheist figures chosen have a strong political agenda, this selection procedure is likely to have influenced the results in terms of the range of emotions voiced by their followers.

[15]   Gelfgren discusses not the use of Twitter by the Catholic Church, but rather Church authorities' attitude toward social media in his analysis of the intra-Catholic discussion sparked by a Twitter profile pretending to be the Archbishop of Sweden (2015). Such discussions emphasize the importance of considering the normative evaluation of (new) media within religious communities in the analysis of their religious media presence and use (Krüger 2012, pp. 12–13).

Cheong adopts a communicative perspective on religious authority formation (2017). Drawing on communication research that investigates how organizations (both non-profit and spiritual) are communicatively constituted, Cheong establishes that religious organizations are "conceptualized as emerging *in* communication and living media practices, as discursive exchanges embedded in everyday mediation, transmediation, and remediation processes" (2017, p. 26). If "religious organization is dynamically brought forth in […] communication" (2017, p. 26), Cheong continues, then so is religious authority. In this way, religious authority can be approached by analyzing communicative utterances and interactions, in which authority is (co-)created and maintained (Cheong 2017, p. 28). Expanding on Cheong's insight, this paper draws on the communicative approach elaborated by Knoblauch (2008) to study the formation of religious community. This approach will be outlined below.

3 Community Building on Twitter: Theoretical Framework

3.1 Community online

The Internet-based mediation[16] of social relationships and collective identities enables inquiries into relationships, belonging, and community formation online (Cheong & Ess 2012, p. 12). Since Tönnies's (1931) formative distinction between the concepts 'community' and 'society', the issue of community has been a central concern in sociological and religious-sociological research (Lüddeckens & Walthert 2018). Initial notions of the community as locally bound, or as naturally occurring in closely connected, spatially limited milieus, led most researchers to initially explore community primarily in terms of local connectedness. While media such as the telephone and the telegraph had already introduced location-independent communication, the advent of the Internet has sparked a new debate on the focus on location-bound community building and the applicability of a concept of community for online interactions and relationships (Gruzd, Wellman & Takhteyev 2011, p. 1295). Many researchers were guided by this face-to-face conceptualization of community and investigated, for instance, to what extent people who interact online also know and meet in locally bound offline spaces and could therefore be seen as a community (Gruzd, Wellman & Takhteyev 2011, pp. 1295–1296). According to Gruzd, Wellman and Takhteyev, this approach might have been practical and fruitful when dealing with digital communication via e-mail or

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[16]   In this paper, the terms 'mediation' and 'mediated' are used solely with reference to a specific type of communication conveyance. Hence, a communicative action is seen as mediated if it is conveyed via "additional, extra-body technical means" (Knoblauch 2008, p. 81).

networking platforms such as Facebook or Myspace. However, Twitter differs from other social media because the structure of its network is strongly asymmetrical and almost always (at least partially) public. Therefore, the study of community and community building on this platform requires a different framework (Gruzd, Wellman & Takhteyev 2011, p. 1296).

3.2 Community building in new media

There are two main research approaches to community building in new media (Murthy 2012). The first approach conceptualizes new media platforms as *social networks* built by digital connections between public and partly-public user profiles (Murthy 2012, p. 1061). In this perspective, the focus lies on the establishment of online connections and the interactions within those networked socialities. The network functionalities of Twitter allow its users to link individual profiles on a structural level via the 'following' function. Unlike other platforms that offer social networking opportunities, the link between profiles on Twitter does not have to be reciprocal; a person who is 'followed' does not have to confirm or reply to this link. According to Huberman, Romero and Wu, this asymmetry of connections may result in little or no interaction between the linked users within a follower network (2009, pp. 2–8). Moreover, users on Twitter often link themselves to others "with different social characteristics to expand their sociability beyond the socially defined boundaries of self-recognition" (Loureiro-Koechlin & Butcher 2013, p. 3), hence Twitter networks are frequently "made up of social networks based on highly diversified and specialised […] weak ties" (Loureiro-Koechlin & Butcher 2013, p. 3). Gruzd, Wellman and Takhteyev understand such networks as communities if there is, with reference to Jones's concept of virtual settlement, "(1) a minimum level of interactivity; (2) a variety of communicators; (3) a minimum level of sustained membership; (4) and a virtual common-public-space where a significant portion of interactive group-CMCs [computer-mediated communication] occur" (Jones 2006), all paired with (5) a "sense of community" (Gruzd, Wellman & Takhteyev 2011, pp. 1298–1312).[17] In order to empirically examine this notion of community, however, the contents published by the networked users have to be included in the investigation.

This level of analysis is the focus of the *second* approach to online community building, in which new media are regarded primarily as *social media* (Murthy 2012, pp. 1061–1062),[18]

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[17] In their network analysis approach, Gruzd, Wellman and Takhteyev conceptualize "a sense of community" via individual users' idea of membership, indicated by "the similarity between Wellman's interaction network […] and the mutual (source-follow) network" (2011, p. 1308), their influence (measured via retweeting behavior), the extent of their integration in the network, and the emotional connection shared by the members of a network (2001, pp. 1308–1312).

[18] The differentiation between 'social networks' and 'social media' is based on ideal types that are more complexly linked to each other in reality. In this article, the differentiation is seen as producing analytical perspectives that

characterized by user-generated content that may be shared, responded to, and redistributed. The profiles of the users that are interacting in this manner do not necessarily have to be digitally linked. In this view, community-building processes are investigated with regard to boundaries and similarities portrayed and established in the process of publishing and sharing user-generated content. In Jones's terminology, social media thereby figure as common-public-spaces, in which a "variety of communicators" come together to interact with one another. They thereby potentially share "a sense of community" (Gruzd, Wellman & Takhteyev 2011), which we conceptualize in terms of a shared, communicatively established, identity position as well as the expression of "shared emotions". By focusing on tweeting as a communicative action, this approach's emphasis on communication can be linked to the concept of *Kommunikationsgemeinschaften* (communication community) established by Knoblauch (2008). In communicative acts, community is built in the delineation of 'self' from 'other' and the symbolic marking of an identity that corresponds to an (imagined) community and is associated with shared features (Knoblauch 2008, p. 84).

Viewed in this light, the term 'sustained membership' seems too demanding. Instead of using the term 'membership', we follow Knoblauch, who explains that "participation in these communities is usually indicated by communicative participation, which in turn is secured by the performative or objectified representation of an identity. Belonging to a group is communicatively signaled beforehand, displayed in the respective situation or demonstrated in a performative manner" (Knoblauch 2008, p. 85). A sense of community in terms of affective affiliation with the imagined communal identity can therefore be analyzed in its communicative manifestations.[19]

Advocating a sociological understanding of Twitter as a social medium, Murthy argues that every publication of a tweet is an act of self-representation (Murthy 2012, p. 1062; 2013, p. 27). Even in 'banal' updates, one's own identity can be constructed and reaffirmed (Murthy 2012, p. 1063). Twitter users can display their own interests and opinions as well as actively search for tweets with the same topics via Twitter's search function and signal their affiliation and like-mindedness to the respective tweeters. Twitter can thus become a medium of collective identity building (Zappavigna 2012) and communalization via shared interests and affiliations based on performative self-representation in tweets. The publishing of individual tweets on a certain topic can be understood as a social act in which 'the self' and its relationship to the imagined collective is discursively presented and negotiated (Murthy 2012). A social discourse, seen as "socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned [practice]" (Wodak & Meyer 2009, p. 6), thereby

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guide research questions and approaches.

[19] In this view, community is established simultaneous to, or perhaps more accurately, *through* its communicative delineation. Hence, community can be observed by examining the communication that constitutes it. This act of observation may itself be conducted simultaneous to the process of communication; however, depending on the ephemerality of the medium through which the communicative acts are conveyed, the establishment of a *Kommunikationsgemeinschaft* may also be analyzed in hindsight.

produces and reproduces communities by communicatively establishing the boundaries of the collective. This process of boundary making is realized by marking oneself as part of a community, which is symbolized as a distinct unity "insofar as the semantics of self-description insist on unity in terms of descent, religion, place of residence, etc." (Lüddeckens & Walthert 2018, p. 271). The demarcation of a community as a distinct social entity allows ongoing social relationships to become 'communal' in Weber's sense. According to his concept of communitization (*Vergemeinschaftung*), a "social relationship [can be] called 'communal' if and so far as the orientation of social action – whether in the individual case, on the average, or in the pure type – is based on a subjective feeling of the parties, whether affectual or traditional, that they belong together" (Weber 2013, p. 40).

While communal relationships have mostly been conceptualized as based on clearly delineated, long-term groups, Gebhardt suggests that in fleeting, 'extra-ordinary' situations, event-based communitization takes place (2010). He defines this community as purely momentary and non-permanent social relationships based on perceived togetherness (2010). While Gebhardt's type of event communities are based on the physical participation of individuals and thus on the physical presence of the temporarily communalizing collective, hashtags on Twitter may function as specific online common-public-spaces (Wills & Fecteau 2016). In this way, hashtag discourses enable communicative affirmation of collective identity positions (Konnelly 2015, p. 11; Zappavigna 2012) and of shared emotionality and "subjectively felt belonging" (Weber 1972, p. 21).

In the communicating of shared emotions, a ritual community can evolve, as has been shown in the context of death rituals (Lüddeckens 2018). Walthert further outlined that "situations of collective effervescence, consisting of collectively shared emotions produced in orchestrated interaction of co-presence, and the tendency of individuals to participate in emotionally gratifying situations, lead to solidarity" (2013, p. 117). Both Walthert (2013) and Collins (2009), who investigated the interrelation between shared emotions and group solidarity in interaction rituals, base the process of collective emotion sharing on the bodily co-presences of the involved individuals. In Collins's words and in the spirit of his commentary with regard to telephone communication, the communication of emotions via tweets would probably be described as "pale compared to face-to-face, embodied encounters" (2005, p. 62). However, if one understands communicative action as the basis for (communicating) emotions and forming a community, it becomes apparent that such action does not necessarily have to take place via bodily co-presence (Knoblauch 2008). Indeed, following Knoblauch, the distinction between direct, 'unmediated', face-to-face communication and mediated communication is questionable insofar as "even face to face communication does not take place directly, but through the medium of acoustic signs and

more or less ritualized gestures" (2008, p. 81).[20] Therefore, the presumed 'paleness' of Twitter-based communication is based on a hierarchizing distinction that cannot be maintained. This observation allows us to posit communicative actions per se, including mediated communication via Twitter, as the decisive factor in the development of a sense of community via the communication of a shared positionality as well as shared emotions, online as well as offline. In the following sections, this thesis is illustrated using an empirical study of communalization on the basis of the hashtag #WhatBritishMuslimsReallyThink.

4 Case Study: Data and Method

The following considerations are based on data collected in a study on the negotiation of religious and national identity via Twitter, carried out by one of the co-authors of this contribution (Aeschbach 2017, 2018). The data consist of all tweets with the hashtag #WBMRT, collected at regular intervals between April 10 and April 21, 2016, by means of hashtag-based queries via the REST API.[21] The first tweet had not been published more than three days before the first data collection query, and the amount of tweets published with the hashtag never exceeded the rate limitation during the time data was collected.[22] The hashtag was active for 11 days, during which a total of 28,735 tweets with the hashtag #WBMRT were collected.

To perform a qualitative content analysis of the collected data, tweets published in the first 24 hours after the first occurrence of the hashtag #WBMRT were selected as a sample. This resulted in a total of 2,134 tweets, including information on the date and time of publication, username of the author, text of the tweet (with hashtags and @mentions), possible hyperlinks,[23] and retweet counts. Of the 2,134 tweets, 76% were retweets. After the removal of the retweets, empty tweets and those otherwise non-retrievable, 502 original tweets, published by 237 Twitter users, were included in the

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[20] With reference to Derrida, Knoblauch continues to state that "in purely phenomenological terms, there can be no direct communication anyway. Communication is, by definition, mediation" (2008, p. 9).

[21] Twitter's REST (Representational State Transfer) API is an interface that allows for multiple active approaches to data collection based on the traditional pull method enabling the researcher to request data from the server (Gaffney & Puschmann 2014, pp. 56–58). Thereby, tweets can only be gathered within a timeframe of 7 days after their publication. Information was gathered by means of the web-based tool TAGS (Twitter Archiving Google Spreadsheet), which accesses Twitter's REST API (Gaffney & Puschmann 2014, p. 56).

[22] The REST API is limited by a rate restriction that only allows for 180 search requests per hour, with 100 tweets per request. Hence, it was possible for 18,000 tweets to be gathered per hour.

[23] Hyperlinks, or simply links, direct other users to documents outside of Twitter. Twitter's restriction in terms of character number has led to the introduction of various URL shortening services that allow users to include hyperlinks to articles, websites, pictures, and other multimedia content in their tweets (Rogers 2014, p. x).

in-depth content analysis. In the following, the analyzed data are discussed with regard to how community was built in the communicative tweeting activity.

5 #WhatBritishMuslimsReallyThink: Communalization in an Event-Based Hashtag

5.1 Interactivity of a variety of communicators

As indicated above, Gruzd, Wellman and Takhteyev (2011) understand "a variety of communicators" with "a minimum of interactivity" (Jones 2006) and "a sense of community" as indicative of an online community. Twitter in general, and specific hashtag formations in particular, can be seen as virtual common-public-spaces in which computer-mediated communication between a variety of actors with at least a minimal level of interactivity may occur (Jones 2006; Wills & Fecteau 2016). #WBMRT exhibits several of those features: the hashtag serves as a particular public space in which a range of different users participate. While it is possible that many people followed the hashtag passively, only those who actively participated, either by publishing or retweeting, marked themselves as part of the temporary hashtag community. Moreover, in the hashtag discourse, the users interacted with one another and one another's content in two main ways.[24] On the one hand, Twitter users directly engaged with one another through the use of the textual marker @mention. In the tweets analyzed, 74 included an @mention, with 46 mentioning other individual Twitter users (many of whom were active in the hashtag discussion), 13 mentioning figures of public interest, and 11 mentioning media or political institutions. While some @mentions can be understood as attempts to start a direct dialogue with the mentioned user,[25] many are references to public figures or institutions. Those mentions can, however, be regarded as interactive at least on the level of interpellation.

On the other hand, users interacted by retweeting. Retweeting (sometimes abbreviated as RT) can be compared to a form of citation via which certain topics and information can be spread quickly and widely (Autenrieth 2010, p. 219). High retweet counts have been understood as indicative of tweets that are weighted as important, relevant, or especially interesting by other Twitter users (Autenrieth 2010; Wills & Fecteau 2016). In this analysis, retweet counts are seen as

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[24]   Another way of interacting on Twitter is by means of favoring specific tweets. Data with regard to favoring, however, have not been captured for this study.

[25]   Overall, relatively few direct public conversations emerged within the hashtag activity. This could be due to the fact that tweets that start with @mentions are removed from the public domain by Twitter (Bruns & Moe 2014, p. 22). It was therefore not possible to gather such tweets by search requests, which means that direct, private conversations containing the hashtag have gone unrecorded.

indicative of a certain level of interactivity between the Twitter users and may cautiously be regarded as indicators of specific content considered important or worthy of retweeting within the hashtag discourse.[26] Of the analyzed tweets, nearly half were retweeted at least once, with the most popular one – "If only Adele said Salaam instead of Hello..."[27] – being retweeted 213 times. In this way, it could be argued that it was possible for the participating Twitter users to hold the reasonable expectation that other users would react to their tweets in some way. In some tweets, it became clear that provoking such a reaction was an explicit goal, for instance in the tweet, "How do I write a RT-worthy tweet for this hashtag?" The same user continued to write three more tweets, two of which ("I should probably be doing work instead of tweeting right now" and "When will we stop having to prove our humanity?") were finally retweeted. In this way, retweeting can be interpreted as users marking a tweet as relevant to the hashtag discourse and thereby validating the author of the retweeted tweet as part of the communicative community. Hence, the pursuit of writing a "RT-worthy tweet for this [particular!] hashtag" can be seen as an attempt to performatively signal belonging to the tweeting community (by writing a tweet) and as the hope of being acknowledged as part of it (by being retweeted). In this way, communal belonging is not understood on the basis of membership, but is shown by way of communicative participation as well as symbolic marking or situational performance of an identity imagined to be shared by the community (Knoblauch 2008, p. 85).

5.2 Sense of community: Shared identity position

The hypothesis of community as being established through a 'sense of community' raises the question of how the construction of such a sense may be empirically observed. The idea of a shared identity position plays a decisive role in establishing a basis for perceived togetherness. In our data, the overall communal identity was marked as the collective of 'British Muslims'. Twitter users who self-identified as 'British Muslims' came together in order to fight the negative portrayal in the *Sunday Times*. The broader 'British Muslim' identity category thereby functioned as the basis on which the ad hoc community was formed. The hashtag itself is already a symbolic marker of this identity position, which the tweeting users adopt for themselves. Moreover, the hashtag includes a linguistic delineation of the group as 'British Muslims', in contrast to all Muslims or to British people in general. This already refers to a group identity that is both differentiated from other groups and an entity to which the participants can self-referentially relate.

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[26] The number of retweets of a given tweet is, however, not solely dependent on its content, but may also vary according to the status of its author.
[27] Adele is a popular British singer-songwriter whose song "Hello (2015) reached number one in the pop music charts of numerous countries.

This 'British Muslim' collective can be understood as an 'imagined community' in Benedict Anderson's sense. Central to Anderson's argument, which he developed to discuss the rise of the national state, is the notion that a national community is established through the invention and creation of an image of a shared community conveyed through media-based communication. Anderson primarily points to the invention of the printing press as a central factor that made it possible to construct a shared image of a national community and publicly shared national narratives and debates, in which the limits of the collective are negotiated (2006 [1983]). On this level, as outlined by Knoblauch, communication communities are not without tradition, but may rather be based on a tradition in the sense of shared knowledge that is required for meaningful communicative action (2008, p. 85). The role of this shared knowledge can be seen in many tweets published in the hashtag discourse, where jokes were based on juxtapositions only meaningful to those acquainted with the concepts referred to.[28] In tweets such as "If only Adele said Salaam instead of Hello..." or "Is this @NandosUK halal?", for instance, a certain knowledge of the Arabic language and of the Islamic concept of halal, as well as familiarity with British pop culture and the popular British food chain Nando's, are necessary to make sense of the humorous tweets. Hence, on this level, the hashtag's common identity was based on the imagined community of British Muslims through both the overt reference to British Muslim as a collective identity category and the reference to knowledge of norms, rules, and further elements implicitly tied to it.

In order to (successfully) participate and performatively represent oneself as part of the hashtag community, knowledge of the specific culture of communication in the hashtag and its reproduction in the tweets as a marker of belonging is required. This means being aware of the communicative conventions not only on Twitter but specifically around the hashtag #WBMRT, including the range of content discussed, the underlying tone, and the ideological direction pursued by the communicatively established community. It is on this level that the particularities of the established community can be identified. First and foremost, most tweets written with the hashtag #WBMRT were humorous. Although a substantial number of tweets (115) did voice outrage toward the published article or assumed a direct, negative attitude toward the content published by the *Sunday Times*, the largest number of tweets did not directly engage with the article, but rather constituted humorous articulations referring to daily experiences, in which a contrast to the marginalizing portrayal made in the article was drawn. The intention for the hashtag to be used in such a way is evident in the first two tweets, in which the hashtag was introduced:

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28   For a similar analysis of humorous tweets, see Wills & Fecteau (2016).

(1) *What time is the match on tomorrow? #WhatBritishMuslimsReallyThink [image]*[29]

(2) *I think I'll have some crisps. #WhatBritishMuslimsReallyThink [image]*

In these two tweets, two mundane references, namely interest in a British sports team and a craving for crisps, were made in order to establish an image of "what British Muslims really think" that contrasted with the one given in the article. This type of humor was taken up in the majority of tweets, with 60% of the tweets referring to everyday life activities and interests, such as food and drink (98 tweets), work and household (33 tweets), clothes and fashion (20 tweets), travel (14 tweets), routine daily activities (14 tweets), concerns about the weather (7 tweets), and pop culture, including references to the entertainment industry (56 tweets) and sports (30 tweets).

Most of these tweets have the same structure: an interest in or concern about an everyday reality or a reference to a public person or pop culture series is expressed as a typical thought of a British Muslim, or rather of the British Muslim tweeting. In this way, tweets such as "I'm craving Indian cuisine", "Why is the weekend only two days?" and "I must reread @jk_rowling's Harry Potter series and @AuthorDanBrown's books again. The best. #bibliophile" all served to descandalize the British Muslim identity by foregrounding an everyday, mundane field of interest. In this way, the threatening and ideologically charged characteristics the article assigns to British Muslims were ridiculed. Moreover, by presenting themselves as equally occupied with the same everyday life interests and problems as other people in general and British people in particular, e.g., "It's raining again! British weather is so unpredictable" or "What's best, sugar before milk in your cuppa or milk then sugar?" the tweets further established a certain sameness that negates the exclusionary rhetoric of the article. In some tweets, this portrayal of sameness was made explicit, as in "Living according to the stated 'British Values' is pretty easy as in many ways Islam requires the same of us" or "Do Christians know that we really love Jesus (peace be upon him) as well?" Similarly, tweets concerned with political content referred to a shared interest in British politics, such as the repeatedly voiced wish for David Cameron, the British prime minister at the time, to resign. Overall, however, there were few tweets that directly engaged with political issues, indicating that the purpose of the hashtag was achieved by witty references to everyday life and pop culture rather than by remarks on politics, which may have further served to depoliticize the established community.

In rejecting the constitutive demarcation inherent in the logic of the article, British Muslims presented themselves as part of the British national community. At the same time, however, British Muslims are marked as a distinct community with reference to their religion. Nearly 22% of all

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[29]   Both tweets included an image of the *Sunday Times* with the headline of the respective article in order to establish the object of reference.

tweets (104) included references to religion in general or Islam in particular, including rituals, concepts, clothing, or vocabulary connected to those religions. Interestingly, almost no theological discussions were conducted. Rather, tweets that referenced religiosity were mostly connected to everyday life interests and worries, for instance, "Why can't all Subways [fast-food chain] be halal?" or "y [why] does Ramadan have to come in June when the weather is peng [great]?" Thus, the topic discussed in the hashtag was everyday religious practice, or the question of how religious practice can be integrated and implemented in everyday life. In some tweets, there was also a certain normalization of religiosity as a mundane part of everyday life, for example when the question of the color combination of clothing and hijab was raised: "Does my hijab match my dress?" In the interest of depoliticizing and descandalizing Muslim identity, potentially ideological beliefs of a religion were de-emphasized and personal needs of religious practice in everyday life highlighted.

In sum, the majority of the hashtag's communication consists of witty tweets that create humor by contrasting the scandalizing third-party image the article presents with the everyday, banal worries and interests of the tweeting participants. The strategic shift in emphasis, from the ideological value systems debated in the article to mundane thoughts and practices discussed in the tweets, paves the way for an image of the nation as a plural and multi-faceted community construct in which British Muslims can simultaneously be distinct and still be part of Britain. By reiterating and rephrasing this recognizable type of humor, belonging to the event-based hashtag community is expressed and the common identity position as open-minded, pop-culture savvy, de-scandalized, and depoliticized tweeting British Muslims is marked and adopted through the communicative act of tweeting.

5.3 A sense of community: Shared emotional affiliation

In addition to establishing a common identity position, a sense of community was also constructed through communicating shared emotional affiliation. A first range of emotions[30] shared in the hashtag was event-based and expressed in terms of outrage and aversion to the *Sunday Times* article, the study it was based on, and its author, Trevor Phillips. Such anger was communicated through devaluating and emotional language, as for example in the following tweets: "[…] what an Islamophobic wazzock [idiot] Trevor Phillips turned out to be", and "[A] poll based on 1,000 people represents over 5,000,000 British Muslims. That's stupid." This emotional thrust was further

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[30]   'Emotion' is a polysemic category; emotions have "to be understood within a particular cultural and historical context" (Lüddeckens 2006, p. 546). They are "generally defined in terms of other terms like 'feelings' and 'affect' that are themselves defined in terms of each other" (Turner 2009, p. 341). For the purposes of this article, we understand the communication of emotions as the communication of aspects that are generally acknowledged as or associated with personal experiences, such as happiness, sadness, fear, and anger (Turner 2009, p. 342).

emphasized by the use of swear words, e.g., "Stop fucking alienating minorities", and punctuation, both with exclamation points: "Stop thinking about us!" and repetitive punctuation: "What does the Sunday Times say I really think??" While most of the anger expressed in the tweets was directed toward the article's content or premises, other tweets expressed displeasure with David Cameron and framed the article as an attempt to distract attention from this political issue: "Nice try by @MailOnline to distract #CameronResign with headline of #bigotry below! @David_Cameron should resign #panamapapers"; "We must neither relent nor get distracted by stories like #WhatBritishMuslimsReallyThink. Yes, #SCAMeron OUT." There were many variations on this theme in the Twitterfeed: "I know this #WhatBritishMuslimsReallyThink channel 4 documentary [based on the article] will be stupid and ignorant so I won't even bother watching it"; "Same old shite by the liberal fascist Trevor Philips"; "Want to know #WhatBritishMuslimsReallyThink? #ResignDavidCameron obviously!", "#ResignDavid-Cameron obvs!", etc. In this way, anger specific to both the article as an event and a British political situation was made into an emotion shared within the communicative community by both repeating and repeatedly acknowledging (via retweets) the shared feeling.[31]

In addition to anger, shared worry, sadness, and exhaustion were triggered by the article. These feelings were conveyed mostly lexically by explicitly stating the emotional state of the Twitter user, for instance, "Kinda tired talking about Islam especially when it's not on our own terms"; "Sigh. This is soooo tiresome and passé. Can't we just be treated like everyone else?" Moreover, a feeling of anxiety about being discriminated against was repeatedly voiced. On the one hand, one source of the worries was state surveillance targeting Muslims, especially with regard to problems while traveling: "I hope some racist doesn't get me kicked off @easyJet for flying while Muslim in a couple of weeks"; "When's the next time I'm going to be stopped and searched at the airport?" On the other hand, concerns were published specifically on how the hijab marks the wearing Muslima as a potential target of harassment. Twitter users expressed the fear of possibly being harassed: "Am I going to get harassed because of my hijab?" as well as a sense of solidarity with others sharing this worry: "So angry & worried that my hijab wearing sisters are afraid but resolute (& so proud 2) when they go out." The fear of and anger about experiences of discrimination were expressed not only in a direct and explicit fashion, but were also conveyed in humorous tweets. In those tweets, humor may have served as an outlet to relieve tension. In line with the findings of Wills and Fecteau (2016), the dominant topic of the tweets using humor for tension relief was terrorism and state surveillance, as demonstrated in the tweet "Is it extreme to yell 'Allahu akbar' when new British period drama comes out?"

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[31]   With regard to the importance of the communication of (shared) emotions for communities, see Collins (2005, 2009) and Lüddeckens (2006).

Lastly, a variety of everyday emotions were shared in the tweets. The emotions expressed in such tweets included surprise, sadness, anger, and joy. These emotions were conveyed by means of emotional lexicalization: "I love John Hughes movies"; punctuation: "How did the weekend end so quickly!!?"; capitalization: "Rachel and Ross were NOT on a break";[32] as well as with emoticons: "Why do we have to wait till 2017 for the next #Sherlock?!? *crying emoticon*."[33] While those tweets expressed a broad variety of emotions that were not all directly repeated in other tweets, they can be interpreted in light of their day-to-day relevance. In this way, those tweets may be viewed as conveying a shared emotional investment in everyday life and pop culture. This emphasis on the centrality of everyday issues may again be interpreted as an attempt to dissociate the presented self-image from the one given in the article, where Muslims were portrayed as potentially dangerous and politically challenging, and to thereby depoliticize and descandalize the image of British Muslims.

Overall, the particular range of emotions elaborated, namely a shared outrage toward the article, worry with regard to discrimination, and a shared emotional proximity to everyday happenings and pop culture themes, are indicative of the communicative conventions that formed around the hashtag.

5.4 Event-based communalization

In the reaction to the *Sunday Times* article "An Inconvenient Truth", the hashtag #WBMRT facilitated temporary and event-specific emotional affiliation via tweeting. In the sense of Gebhardt's fleeting event communalization, the hashtag can thus be interpreted as a temporary event during which community is established through shared emotions. To be more precise, we argue that this community is established by communicating shared emotions as well as a shared identity position. However, unlike in Gebhardt's examples, the emotional participation was not triggered by an event with a festive, out-of-the-ordinary character, but rather by the article in the *Sunday Times*, which was not received as an "out-of-the-ordinary" event by the participants of the hashtag.[34] Moreover, while Gebhardt conceptualizes the anonymity of an event as a possibility to 'disrobe', i.e. to lower the 'embarrassment thresholds' and to act without fear of consequences (2010, p. 183), the ad hoc Twitter community around the hashtag #WBMRT showed no such signs

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[32] This tweet refers to the popular TV series *Friends* and the debate around the relationship between two of the characters therein. The tweet above can be read as an indirect reaction to another tweet published in the hashtag discourse, namely "Ross and Rachel were on a break."

[33] In this tweet, the Twitter user was lamenting the ending of the current season of the popular British TV series *Sherlock*.

[34] This sense that the publication of the *Sunday Times* article was one in a series of similar events is voiced in tweets such as, "Oh here we go again... after switching off British news channels!" and "Same old shite by the liberal fascist Trevor Philips."

of a lack of inhibition as the sharing of intimate biographical remarks. Hence, it is not through the experience of emotions that are only possible in an extraordinary happening that community is built, but rather, with this hashtag, through the communication of emotions[35] and convictions specific to and shared at a particular, temporally limited event by the participating Twitter users. The hashtag analyzed can thus be seen as a situational event community insofar as the social relationships are not established to be permanent, but purely momentary and based on hashtag- and event-specific emotional affiliation.

6 Conclusion

In the analysis of #WBMRT, we argued that Twitter can be seen as a virtual common-public-space in which situational event-based communitization can evolve via mediated, spatially detached communication. Drawing on the concept of online community as specified by Jones (2006), we showed that the hashtag was used by a variety of communicators to interact, and that they established a 'sense of community' by communicatively expressing and affirming a shared identity position as well as a range of mutually shared emotions. In the case of #WBMRT, we see this community as emerging *ad hoc* in the establishment of event-based, emotional affiliation. Furthermore, Gebhardt's (2010) theory on fleeting event communities allows us to understand the temporal volatility of event-based interaction as community building. This ephemeral community, constituted by a shared sense of identity and emotional affiliation of the Twitter users participating in the hashtag discourse, is (re-) produced and consolidated in the tweets, understood as communicative actions. In this way, #WBMRT is understood as a public space in which a 'communicative community' (*Kommunikationsgemeinschaft*, Knoblauch 2008) is situationally formed in the process of social media-based communication.

In this particular case, the temporary communalization of the Twitter users was facilitated by the comprehensive category 'British Muslims', itself understood as a communicatively established imagined community. In the construction of the particular 'British Muslim selves' of the tweeting participants, the exclusion of Muslims in Phillips's portrayal of Britishness was rejected. In the simultaneous marking of British 'Muslims' as a different and distinct group *and* as part of the British nation, an alleged incompatibility between Muslimness and Britishness was negated. This implicitly creates an image of Britishness that invites consideration of the British national community as multidimensional and inclusive.

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[35] Roberts et al. (2012) argue that the fact that tweets are written in real time leads to more emotion-laden corpora. For sentiment analysis of tweets, see also Pak & Paroubek (2010).

The example of #WBMRT demonstrates that digitally mediated communication on Twitter may be interpreted as a form of communitization. Based on the discourse analyzed, we further argue that the communication of shared identity positions and shared emotions may be seen as essential in the communicative community-building process. In conclusion, we stipulate that it is necessary not only to take seriously the relevance of mediated communication for the establishment of individual subjectivities and collective belonging, but also to further investigate the potential significance of communicatively shared emotions in community building online.

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Media, Milieu, and Community

Forms of (Media-based) *Vergemeinschaftung* within and beyond the *Association of Vineyard Churches*

Fabian Huber

Abstract

This article examines the role of media in the process of religious communalization (*Vergemeinschaftung*), drawing on the example of the Evangelical *Association of Vineyard Churches*. It argues that a direct connection between media production, media use, and integration in the community is too shortsighted. Instead, the empirical study will demonstrate how different media – including those produced by various *Vineyard* churches – circulate in a specific milieu. It is within this milieu, with its constellation of local celebrations, Bible studies and regional events, that the members of *Vineyard* churches (re)construct their religious belonging in a complex interplay of face-to-face and media-based communication. In the end, the analysis highlights the multilayered role of media within and beyond the *Association of Vineyard Churches* and provides a contribution to the conceptual clarification of 'community'.

Keywords

1 Introduction

In this contribution, I will discuss the role of media in the process of communalization (*Vergemeinschaftung*).[1] I assume that media are important to the community in various ways, which

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[1] The translation of the German term *Vergemeinschaftung* is extremely difficult, and different possibilities have to be considered. I have chosen the term 'communalization' because it is a perfect compromise between the colloquial 'communitization' and the usual translation of Weber's term, 'communal relationship' (Swedberg 2005, pp. 43f.).

I will analyze by drawing on the empirical example of the *Association of Vineyard Churches*[2] in Switzerland. Two recent approaches to religious communities, *congregational studies* and the *posttraditional community* approach, form the theoretical starting point of my argument (2). After a few remarks on my data and methods (3), I will discuss the case of the Vineyard (4). This begins with a short introduction to the history of the Vineyard movement.[3] Then I will elaborate on the media profile of the Vineyard from a *crossmedia* perspective. This allows me to generate insights into the status of the Vineyard's media-based communication and mission work in relation to conventional church work (Krüger 2012, pp. 452–453) (4). In particular, I will examine to what extent media use and media production are able to reflect the structures of a religious community. This will lead into a discussion of the evangelical milieu (5). Within this milieu, the members of the Vineyard (re)construct their religious belonging in a complex interplay of different forms of (media-based) communalizations. In order to capture these different forms of communalization adequately, I will conclude by introducing the concept of the *multilayered community* (6). This concept brings together a structural and an individual perspective with special regard to media. In the end, the analysis of media will allow for a more complete understanding of the religious community itself.

2 Theoretical Starting Point: Recent Approaches to the Religious Community

To build my theoretical framework, I will refer to two recent approaches to the study of religious communities: *congregational studies* and the *posttraditional community* approach (*posttraditionale Gemeinschaft*). Combining the two perspectives, I will emphasize the tensions between organizational unity, on the one hand, and individual openness on the other.

2.1. Congregational studies

Due to their focus on forms of organization, congregational studies are particularly well suited for analyzing the structure of religious communities. Douglass and colleagues (e.g., Douglass 1927) initiated the studies of congregations in the 1920s. After a long period without further investigation,

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The term 'communalization' takes up both Weber's 'communal' and emphasizes at the same time that this is a process. With this choice of term, I also intend to establish a connection on the level of content. For Weber (1980 [1921]), a communal relationship relies on the involved parties' subjective feeling that they belong together (p. 21). However, he emphasizes that the majority of relationships have some characteristics of a communal relationship and some characteristics of an associative one as well (*Vergesellschaftung*) (p. 22). In order to take this into account, Weber's term should be brought closer to the colloquial term and thus closer to practice.

2   In the following, I shall use the shorthand Vineyard.
3   Here the discussion will not be limited to the Vineyard in Switzerland.

Wind and Lewis revived congregational studies in 1994. These authors define a congregation as 1) a group of people who 2) gather regularly 3) to worship 4) at a particular place (Wind & Lewis 1994, pp. 1–3).[4] A number of research approaches have been formulated on the basis of this definition. Representatives of these approaches see the congregation as the core of religious life (Monnot 2010, p. 21; Warner 1994). By concentrating on the local community, congregational studies deal with questions about its structure and activities concerning, for example, rituals, leadership, finances, or conflicts (see Ammerman 1997; Chaves 1999, 2004; Monnot 2010; Reimer & Wilkinson 2015; Stolz et. al. 2011).[5] Various authors agree that the primary purpose of a congregation is worship (Ammerman 2005; Holifield 1994; Warner 1994; Wind & Lewis 1994). According to Chaves (2004, p. 8), the production and reproduction of religious meaning takes place within the congregation.[6] In this context, the inclusion of media is also discussed regarding, for example, the ways in which different kinds of music or visual projections are integrated into the worship (Ammerman 2005; Chaves 2004; Monnot 2010; Stolz et. al. 2011).

However, this concentration on the local community (congregation) excludes various other forms of communalization, including irregular assemblies such as events or seminars and gatherings that are not centered on a particular place, such as certain Bible studies (Monnot 2010, p. 78–81).[7] Also excluded are, per definition, media-based forms of communalization. Even Chaves (2004), one of the most prominent scholars in this field, admits that it is very difficult to look at congregations as coherent and autonomous organizations. In fact, many of their activities take place in small groups involving only a part of the congregations' members (pp. 203–207), while other may have a larger scope that goes beyond the local community (pp. 207–211). Therefore, Chaves states, "the religious community in which individuals live, work, and worship together seems something more than a congregation" (p. 2). However, Chaves do not indicate what this "more" is, and it is therefore our task to find out. The second theoretical approach mentioned above could be useful in answering this question.

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[4]   This definition has been further developed by various scholars. The definition used by Chaves (2004, pp. 1–2) is well known and widespread: "By 'congregation' I mean a social institution in which individuals who are not all religious specialists gather in physical proximity to one another, frequently and at regularly scheduled intervals, for activities and events with explicitly religious content and purpose, and in which there is continuity over time in the individuals who gather, the location of the gathering and the nature of the activities and events at each gathering."

[5]   The studies focus mainly on the American religious landscape. With the publication of the *National Congregations Study Switzerland* (NCSS) data (Monnot 2010; Stolz et. al. 2011), there are now also studies on Switzerland. These are not only important for theory, but also for the empirical data they present.

[6]   The emphasis on 'worship' can probably be traced back to the fact that it distinguishes the religious community from other communities.

[7]   Some studies try to consider this by looking at collaboration with other organizations or the environment of a congregation (Ammerman 1997), traditions (Ammerman 2005; Chaves 2004), or the local context (Reimer & Wilkinson 2015). However, the focus remains on the congregation.

2.2. Posttraditional community

The posttraditional community approach[8] is predicated on the assumption that we live in a postmodern society.[9] Its proponents consider the process of individualization to be the main characteristic. However, they presuppose an individualization process that does not lead to the isolation of the individual, but to new forms of communities, which they call posttraditional communities (Gebhardt 2000, p. 28; Hitzler 1998, p. 82; Hitzler 2015, p. 252; Hitzler & Pfadenhauer 2009, p. 376). Against this backdrop, the focus of their research lies on forms of communalization that are based on individual decisions that may be temporary and do not include an obligation to belong (Hitzler 1998, p. 82; Hitzler et al. 2008, p. 10). Consequently, some authors include music or youth scenes, markets, and events.

But to what extent can one's belonging to a community be understood as something that is not obligatory and is a purely individual decision? I contend that the concept of community (especially religious ones) implies at least some binding aspects. Norms and values are not generated by individuals alone, but are developed within a group and thus engender a number of mutual expectations among its members.[10] According to Weber, an important part of community action (*Gemeinschaftshandeln*) is, in particular, its meaningful orientation toward expectations (Weber 1988a, p. 441).[11] Following this insight, it can be concluded that the subjective feeling of belonging includes a subjective feeling of commitment.

The scholars working within the posttraditional community approach emphasize that these forms of community are also characterized by shared values and boundaries that indicate the 'not-us' (Hitzler et. al. 2008, p. 10). However, can these characteristics be found at, for example, an event? Indeed, an evangelical event would meet these criteria (while a rock concert or a carnival would not). Nevertheless, this can probably be traced back to the fact that participants in an evangelical event already belong to an evangelical church, and not to the event itself. This fact is also evident in investigations by representatives of the approach itself. For example, an empirical examination of the Catholic World Youth Days 2005 shows that church members traveled there together, spent their time in the group and traveled back together. Communalization forms beyond one's own group remained limited (Kirchner 2013, p. 221). In this way, such an event appears to be an intensification of an existing sense of belonging or an expansion of the community. A

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[8]   This approach is especially common in the German-language scholarship.

[9]   Although the same characteristics are referred to, the nature of 'modernity' shows a certain inconsistency among the various authors. For example, Hitzler (1998) uses the term 'postmodern society', Gebhardt (2000) speaks of a 'late modernity', and Hitzler et al. (2008) of an 'other modernity'.

[10]   Here it is also important to ask what role media play in the development and dissemination of such values and norms.

[11]   In this respect, this also applies to religion, since Weber (1980, p. 245) defines religion as "a certain kind of community action".

posttraditional community is therefore simply a form of communalization, but hardly an independent community.[12] Nevertheless, or even because of this, I consider the inclusion of this approach to be useful. These forms of community, characterized as they are by a lower degree of organization, serve as a complement to the type of community explored in congregational studies.

Highlighting the importance of the individual seems appropriate, particularly in the evangelical field where there is a strong emphasis on a personal relationship with God, which is considered one of the main characteristics of Evangelicalism (Bebbington 1989; Hunter 1987; Willaime 2001). Evangelicals maintain that personal belief is what matters, but that the way in which it is lived out can be diverse, and that individuals should therefore pick whatever works best for them (Stolz & Huber 2016). However, this agreement in the emphasis on the individual implies the same criticism. Here, too, the extent to which responsibility ultimately lies with the individual is questionable.[13] Furthermore, within the posttraditional communities approach, the connection between media and communalization has already been considered from a theoretical perspective and empirically analyzed. Deterding (2008) examines 'virtual communities' as a dynamic field of different forms of communalization. He suspects that the contrast between online and offline is gradually dissolving (p. 129). Regarding 'mediatization', the influence of media on religion was also taken into account. In this way, the question of the extent to which media can be a producer of religious events and experiences has been addressed (see Hepp & Krönert 2003, 2007).

In summary: combining the two approaches is particularly useful for the study of the role of media in communalization. Congregational studies offer a strong community concept, but this fails to allow enough scope to include media. The posttraditional communities approach, on the other hand, is open to various forms of media-based communalization, albeit at the expense of the concept of community.

3 Data and Methods

My data stem from the SNSF project "The Dynamics of Media Use and Forms of Religious Communalization",[14] which was carried out from 2014 to 2018 at the University of Fribourg. The study used a mixed-methods survey. The quantitative data were collected in the summer of 2016.

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[12]   Even Hitzler (1998, p. 84) is of the opinion that it is uncertain whether such forms of communalization will ever become communities.

[13]   In section 6.4 we will see that social relations are essential here. For the paradox of community and individual relationships to God, see also Walthert 2010.

[14]   *Die Dynamik von Mediennutzung und den Formen religiöser Vergemeinschaftung*.

Together with a team of students,[15] my colleagues and I filled out 164 questionnaires[16] with members of the Vineyard[17] through face-to-face PAPIs (Paper-And-Pencil Interviews) before and after the celebrations (the regular Sunday worship) (Diekmann 2014, pp. 439, 512f.). This survey is representative of the members of the Vineyard in Switzerland. The data were analyzed with SPSS 24.

In addition, we conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with members of the Vineyard, five of whom held leadership positions. This method has a couple of advantages: first, adherence to a structure ensures a degree of comparability; second, the freedom that is built into semi-structured interviews allowed us to be open and able to react to what our interlocutors said (Mayring 2002, pp. 66f.). Over the course of 60 to 90 minutes, the conversation partners told us how they grew up and came to the community and, in greater detail, which media they use for their religious life and how important these media are in the community. The interviews were transcribed and imported into the *Atlas.ti* program. The evaluation was then carried out according to the coding approach of 'grounded theory' (Strauss & Corbin 1998).

Furthermore, we asked five Vineyard members to fill out a media diary for one week. Filling out the form on a daily basis meant that participants could more easily and accurately recall their media usage in detail (Möhring & Schlütz 2002, p. 575). As participating observers, we attended various activities of the Vineyard: celebrations, small groups, and events. This enabled us to see which media are used and how. The different methods generated different types of data, and the combination of these different types of data provides us with deep insights into the role of media in communalization.

4 The Case Study: The Vineyard in Switzerland

4.1. History

The Vineyard originated in the 1970s in California as one of the renewal movements of the so-called third wave of the charismatic Christian tradition (Bialecki 2015, p. 179). Following the long-

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[15] For the students, the interviews were part of a course (*Forschungsatelier: Mediennutzung von Religionsgemeinschaften*) in which they learned interview techniques and were introduced to the topic of religion, media and communalization.

[16] The development of the questionnaire was essentially based on the information obtained from the qualitative interviews.

[17] In addition, 183 interviews were conducted with the comparison group, Jehovah's Witnesses. Altogether, we have data from 347 persons.

standing leadership of John Wimber (1934–1997), a converted jazz musician, the Vineyard developed a distinct identity. From the beginning, music was the main medium of the group – besides, of course, the Bible. In the year 1990 the Vineyard founded its own music label, Vineyard Music, which, by its own account, at its peak had a market share of 85% of the worship music segment (Watling 2008, p. 88). The Vineyard became internationally known through the charismatic event known as the 'Toronto blessing'. From 1994 to 1995, in the Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship (then known as the Toronto Airport Vineyard), phenomena such as speaking in tongues, uncontrolled shaking, and palsies occurred, which the participants interpreted as manifestations of the Holy Spirit (Poloma 1997; Römer 2002). In 1994, a local charismatic church in Switzerland, the Basileia Bern, was the first in the German-speaking area to join the Vineyard movement. From there, the Vineyard expanded to other parts of Switzerland and to the neighboring countries, and in 1999 the umbrella organization for Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, Vineyard D.A.CH., was founded (Watling 2008, pp. 114–132).[18] Today there are some 69 Vineyard churches in the German-speaking area.[19]

4.2. The Vineyard's media profile

4.2.1. Media production

Media production of the Vineyard churches is mainly local. Normally, it is undertaken by small groups or private individuals. It is fair to say that music remains Vineyard's predominant medium,[20] a fact that is also true for the level of production. Most local communities have at least one band that compose new songs and produces CDs.[21] Almost every local Vineyard community has its own website, where it provides information about its activities and leadership as well as about the history and core values of the Vineyard. The websites also serve as media platforms: one can listen to podcasts, view photos and videos, and order books, magazines, workbooks and CDs. Many Vineyard communities also release their own magazines or newsletters. Some communities even run their own social media sites, generally on Facebook.[22]

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[18] Freudenberg (2018) provides a good overview of the Vineyard in the German-speaking area.
[19] See http://www.vineyard-dach.net/vineyards/ueberblick/dach-liste.html (accessed August 2018).
[20] In referring to music as the 'predominant medium', I want to emphasize the great importance that music has for the Vineyard in all areas: history, the production of the collective, and individual media use. Below I use the data collected to demonstrate the importance of music in individual media use.
[21] The CDs are sold on Vineyard websites. Vineyard songs (even from Swiss bands) are also available on popular platforms like ITunes, Spotify and YouTube.
[22] For example, the Vineyard Bern, with over 1500 'likes' (https://de-de.facebook.com/vineyardbern/).

The Vineyard produces almost no media beyond these local and individual activities.[23] For the German-speaking area, there is currently just one website for the umbrella organization, Vineyard D.A.CH.[24] The site gives an overview of the different Vineyard communities in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. It also provides information about upcoming events and offers services for the communities. In the media section of the website, podcasts and statements by the leadership are available. Moreover, there is a shop where one can buy books, music and issues of the magazine *Equipped.* This magazine was published by Vineyard D.A.CH. from 2001 to 2014. The decision to discontinue the magazine can be explained by the advent of electronic media – all of the information and content that was formerly included in the magazine is now communicated through the website.[25] Another possible explanation is the decline of 'Vineyard identity' as a movement and the related decline in importance of the umbrella organization in the domain of media.[26] The Vineyard movement in the German-speaking area nevertheless strives to present a unified image, as is evident from the similar designs of the various websites and the use of the Vineyard logo. The umbrella organization even encourages local communities to make use of the corporate design.[27] In the end, decisions regarding self-presentation lie with the individual churches.

4.2.2. Collective media use

Within the Vineyard, different forms of collective media use take place and play an important role in celebrations. The opening and closing of events are marked by music: a band plays while participants sing, dance and raise their hands toward the ceiling. In the celebrations that I attended, there was a screen above the stage where song lyrics,[28] quoted Bible verses and important points of the preaching were displayed. The screen affects the participants' individual media use in a number of ways. Most importantly, participants do not have to bring songbooks or even Bibles with them. In addition, in the building there are stands where people can buy books, CDs, and more. In interviews, respondents also mentioned collective forms of media use that take place outside celebrations. People read relevant books together (including, of course, the Bible) and discuss them in small groups. In such small groups, people also use other media, sometimes making short films or recording music.

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[23]   Although media are produced internationally (for example in the U.S.), they were never mentioned in the interviews and do not seem to affect the members of Vineyard in Switzerland.

[24]   http://www.vineyard-dach.net/

[25]   The editorial in the final issue explains that it is time to break new ground.

[26]   In my opinion, this is essentially due to the Evangelical milieu in Switzerland (see section 5) and the importance of social relationships (see section 6.4).

[27]   To this end, the Vineyard even operates a dedicated website, http://www.vinboxx.net, with resources for branding and promoting a corporate identity.

[28]   For English-language songs the German translation was also displayed.

4.2.3. Individual media use

At the individual level, music appears to be second only to the Bible as the most important and most frequently used form of media. In our sample, 73% of the members surveyed stated that they listen to worship music at least several times a week, not including during the celebrations, with 35% indicating that they listen daily. Only 3% said that they never listen to worship music in their spare time.
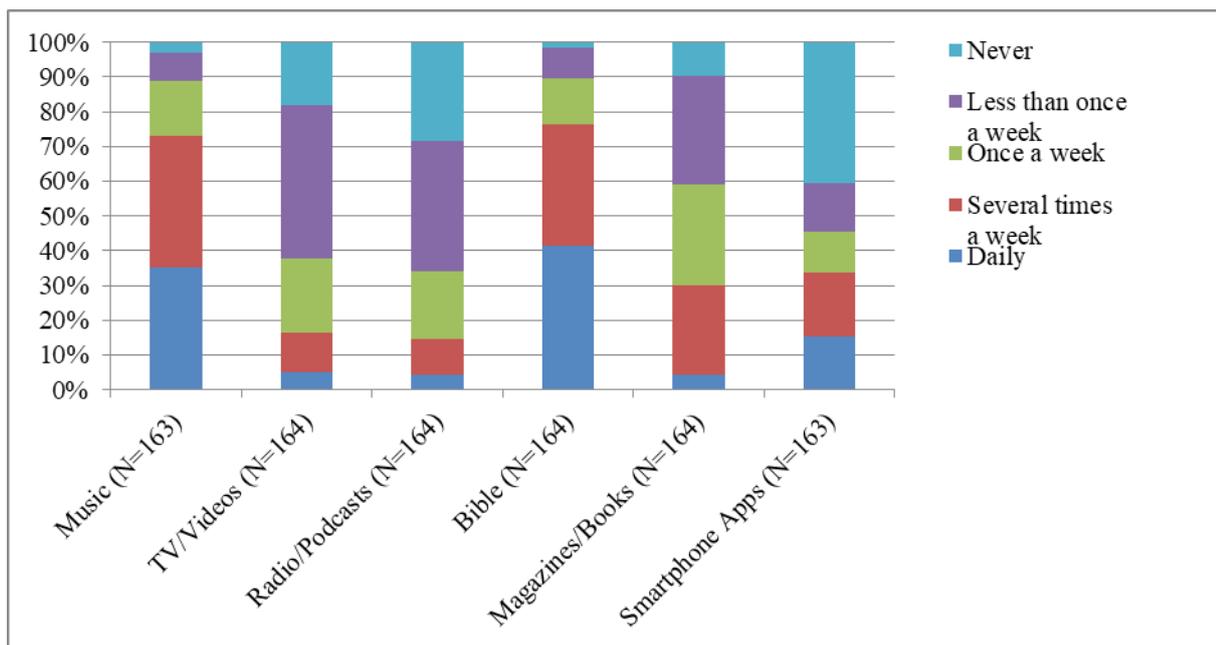

Figure 1: Individual Religious Media Use

When it comes to expressing and practicing their faith through media, Vineyard members read magazines and books, watch TV shows, listen to radio, and use several Smartphone apps. However, in comparison to music, these other forms of media were used far less often for faith-related purposes (see fig. 1).[29]

Striking, however, is the fact that the Vineyard's own media are very seldom used. In our data, we find a first indicator of this in answers to the question, "How often do you visit a Vineyard website?" (see fig. 2). Not one person stated that they visit a Vineyard website every day. Just 9.8% of the people surveyed go to such a website several times a week, almost half go less than once a week, and 11% do not go at all.

[29]   As already mentioned, except the Bible.
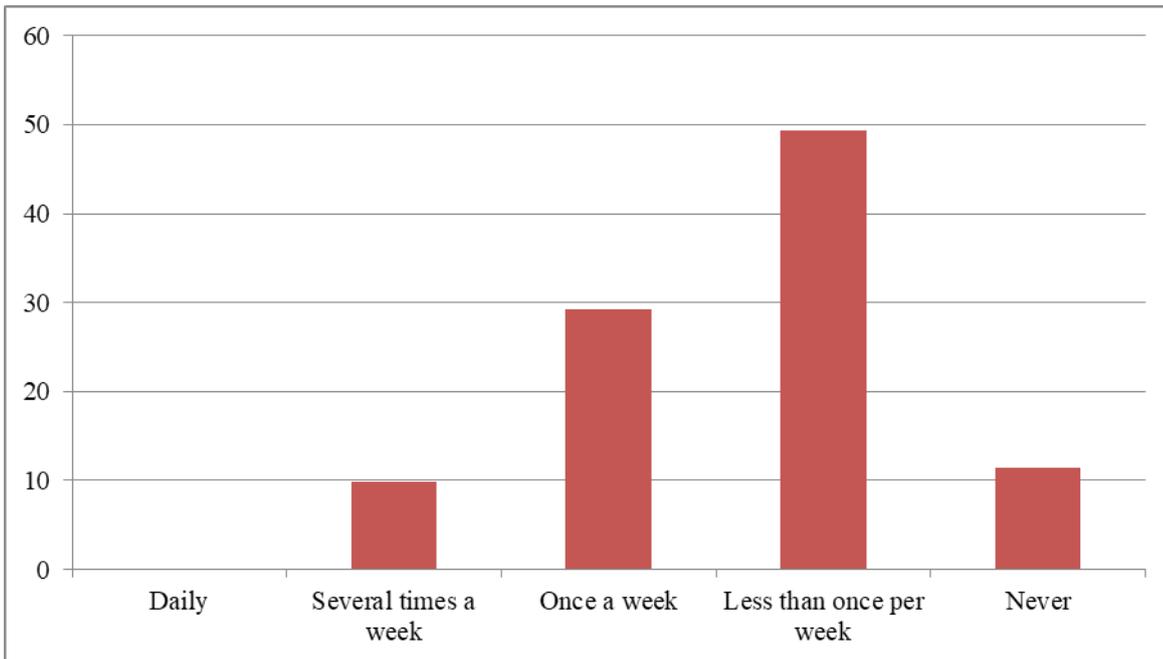
Figure 2: Use of a Vineyard Homepage (N=164)

In the semi-structured interviews it was pointed out that, while the members appreciate the fact that the Vineyard has its own website, they seldom use it.[30] Melanie, a 42-year-old member, expressed this sentiment as follows:

> [I use] the homepage very rarely. If I need the address of somebody, for example, I go to the homepage. That happens very seldom. We do have a bulletin board [on the site] where you can give away stuff or ask for stuff, if someone needs a room or such stuff. Otherwise, [my use is] mega little. And Vineyard: if I see a book or a CD which seems exciting, then I get it, but not because it is from the Vineyard.

This indicates that even the rare use of the Vineyard's 'own website' does not necessarily serve a religious purpose, but rather an organizational one. More important is the fact that media are used because they appeal to the individual and not because they are from the Vineyard. Other interviewees also stressed this point. It does not really matter if a particular medium says Vineyard on it or not; that is not what the members are looking for.[31]

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[30] This point is very interesting. Is the offer really appreciated, or does the expression of appreciation reflect an expected commitment that has to be communicated to the outside world (despite a real lack of interest)?

[31]   Only one exception was mentioned: when it comes to the history of the Vineyard or the local community, the fact that the media are produced by the Vineyard itself is considered an important factor guaranteeing the reliability of

As we have seen, the Vineyard's own media production is rather limited. Moreover, it appears to be virtually irrelevant for the members whether the media they consume come from the Vineyard. This combination leads to the fact that individual media use is, to a large extent, not covered by the Vineyard's own production. Therefore, to get an accurate picture of media use among Vineyard members, we have to expand our focus.

5 The Evangelical Milieu

The empirical results regarding media point to a factor that is also constitutive of communalization in general among the members of the Vineyard: the evangelical milieu. While there are a number of conceptions of 'milieu' in the social sciences, the definition put forward by Schulze provides common ground.[32] According to Schulze, a milieu is a large group of individuals that exibits the following components: 1) common structural characteristics; 2) common cultural characteristics; 3) a high volume of internal communication; and 4) explicit boundaries (Schulze 1990, 1992).

For Switzerland, the application of the concept to Evangelicals is well researched, and we have representative empirical data that demonstrates the milieu nature of Swiss Evangelicals, at both an individual and an organizational level (Favre 2006; Favre & Stolz 2009; Gachet 2013; Huber & Stolz 2017; Stolz 1999; Stolz & Favre 2005; Stolz et. al 2014a, 2014b; Stolz & Huber 2016).[33] According to these studies, Evangelicals are a cohesive group who share a common lifestyle and certain values that distinguish them from the rest of the society. The demarcation is strengthened by a high level of internal communication, which in turn results in a pronounced sense of togetherness. In the center of the milieu is an evangelical culture, which is characterized by its identification as Christian. Beyond the confirmation of the milieu character, the studies focus on different aspects of the community.[34] Media, to date, have not been one of the focuses. However,

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the account.

[32] An overview of the different approaches can be found in Matthiesen (1998). Particularly well known in the German-speaking areas are the SINUS milieus (e.g., Barth & Flaig 2013; Vester et. al. 2001). These are often used in market research, even by religious actors (e.g., Milieustudie zh.ref.ch 2011; Ebertz 2018). However, the SINUS milieus have been criticized for representing mentality groups rather than milieus (Rössel 2005, p. 119).

[33] Evangelicals were also examined outside Switzerland with regard to their milieu character. The first study was Riesebrodt (1990, 1995). Similar investigations using the term 'subculture' in place of 'milieu' can be found in Smith (1998) and Reimer (2003).

[34] The most comprehensive is Stolz et. al (2014a). It deals with the competitive strength of the milieu, values and norms, communities, and socialization, among other topics. Stolz & Favre (2009) investigate the question of the reproduction of the milieu. Gachet (2013) deals with leaving the milieu, and Stolz and Huber (2016) focus on Church changes within the milieu.

Huber and Stolz (2017, p. 278) raise the question of the possible significance of media for the milieu.

5.1. The Vineyard in the Evangelical milieu

I will argue that the evangelical milieu affects the Vineyard and its members on several levels. Based on the information we gained through the interviews, the embedding of members in the Vineyard and in other forms of communalization within the evangelical milieu can be described as follows.[35]

At the center is the congregation – the local Vineyard community – where the celebrations take place. Within the local community we find various smaller groups (e.g., for young people, for parents, for women, etc.). The local community is in a loose association with other Vineyard communities and with other churches embedded within the evangelical milieu. The different churches (not only those from the Vineyard) exchange and work together on certain occasions, for instance, when organizing events. Furthermore, there are Bible study groups that extend beyond the borders of the individual churches. Finally, there are other suppliers of products and services within the evangelical milieu. Some of them are media outlets, for example the *SCM-Bundesverlag Schweiz* (a Christian publishing house that publishes magazines for various target groups, for example for families, men, and young people),[36] *ERF Medien/lifechannel.ch* (a Christian media company that is primarily engaged in television and radio),[37] and *livenet.ch*[38] (the largest web portal for and by Swiss Christians).[39] This means that the local Vineyard churches (or the umbrella organization) do not need to cover the whole media spectrum, nor is what they produce exclusively for their own members, but rather for the entire evangelical milieu.

The members of the Vineyard participate in different groups within the evangelical milieu. They attend the celebrations of the Vineyard as well as of other churches; go to training schools, healing classes, camps and more. In addition, the individuals have in the evangelical milieu a wide range of media available, which they can use in relation to their own beliefs. The media diaries also showed that the members use a variety of media in connection with their faith (magazines, films, music, etc.), but almost exclusively those from the evangelical milieu (that is, from the aforementioned media producers).

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[35] Here a brief overview will suffice. Some aspects will be discussed in more detail in section 6.

[36] https://bundes-verlag.net/ch/

[37] https://lifechannel.ch/de/ERF-Medien/Portraet?=

[38] https://www.livenet.ch/

[39] In interviews, respondents indicated that they use media products from these companies. In addition, all three companies are members of the Swiss Evangelical Alliance (see: http://www.each.ch/unser-miteinander/mitglieder/werke/).

To sum up, it can be said that, within the evangelical milieu, the different media illustrate the diversity of forms of communalization, and both the various forms of communalization and the media themselves provide members with a sense of identification with being Christians and with their own local communities.

6 The Multilayered Community

Neither the concepts of community mentioned in the second section of this article nor the idea of milieu are capable of adequately capturing these various ways of belonging. They draw boundaries that are too narrow (in the case of congregational studies) or too wide (in the case of the milieu concept), or they assume that people do not commit themselves and only have a temporary sense of belonging as members of a community (as in the posttraditional community). Furthermore, they neglect the role of media. To take into account these various factors, I propose a new concept of community: the *multilayered community*. This concept integrates the approaches already mentioned and has the following characteristics: the multilayered community 1) is based on an individual perspective, 2) has an organized core, 3) includes various other forms of communalization, and 4) manifests itself in social relationships.

6.1. The individual perspective

The individual perspective serves as the methodological instrument that makes it possible to observe the differences and interrelations between the other levels of the community.[40] First, I follow an approach based on methodological individualism as laid out in Max Weber's action theory. This means that the analysis of macrosocial structures must be 'microfounded' (Schluchter 2003, p. 60). According to Weber's famous definition,[41] sociology deals with understanding social actions and explaining their consequences. It is a matter of determining the subjectively intended reasons underlying the actions of actors. Weber calls such reasons the 'motive'. To recognize the motive requires a grasp of an entire complex of meaning (Weber 1980, pp. 4–5; 1988, pp. 429–431; see also Schluchter 2003, p. 56). Because individual persons are for us the only understandable carriers of meaningful, oriented action, we have to treat the individual and his or her actions as the

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[40]   Another reason is the data, especially the quantitative data, which focus on individual actions, as has been shown for the media-based forms of communication. On the content level, the emphasis on the individual person, as we have seen in the posttraditional community and within the evangelical field (see section 2), can be included.

[41]   "Sociology […] is a science concerning itself with the interpretative understanding of social action and thereby with a causal explanation of its course and consequences" (Weber 1980, p. 1; cited in Swedberg 2005, p. 2).

most fundamental unit of analysis. A social entity (here, the community) therefore must be treated as solely the result and mode of organization of the particular acts of individual persons (Weber 1980, p. 6; 1988, p. 439).

In order to include media in the analysis, Weber's action theory can be supplemented by newer insights from the sociology of knowledge, which invite us to extend the concept of everyday life to media experiences (Ayaß 2010, pp. 293–297; Keppler 2010, p. 107; Krüger 2012, pp. 136–140).[42] While Weber's concept of community implies the co-presence of the actors, these approaches emphasize the possibility of creating meaning beyond face-to-face communication (Knoblauch 2008, p. 81; 2017, pp. 306–312).[43] With this extension of the theory of action, it is possible to analyze media-based forms of communalization and ask how media can contribute to the construction of meaning and to what extent they contribute to one's identification with the community.

Finally, the focus on the individual highlights the different ways of belonging. Following Simmel's idea of "the intersection of social circles" (*Kreuzung sozialer Kreise*) (Simmel 2013, pp. 456–511), we could develop an agent-based social network model and analyze how a person is embedded in different groups. However, in contrast to Simmel's social circles, it is not the aim here to consider all groups, but just the ones that are important for a person's religious life (the congregation, the Bible study group, events, WhatsApp groups, and so on). They all stand on common ground: being Christian is their central identity, and they encourage this identity.[44] The multiple group affiliations and various intensities of identification with these can vary from person to person. Therefore, it is important to start from the individual. This in turn leads back to action theory. Weber states that the real actions of individuals can be oriented to different points of reference (Weber 1988, p. 445). Again, questions can then be asked regarding the extent to which media are important for the individual's orientation to a reference point, or can even be a reference point in and of themselves.

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[42] Krüger (2012, p. 159) points also to the resulting problems with regard to the concept of religion.
[43] Of course, the relationship between action and communication is at stake here. While Tyrell (1998) sees the two terms as opposites, Knoblauch (1998) connects the two in communicative action. I follow Knoblauch here.
[44] They therefore should not be in conflict with each other, which would lead to divided loyalties and struggles (Simmel 2013, p. 468).

6.2. Organized core

I concur with congregational studies in understanding the local community as forming the core of a religious community.[45] For this, we have empirical evidence: almost 90% of the people surveyed attend a Vineyard celebration almost every week, and some even more often (see fig. 3).[46]
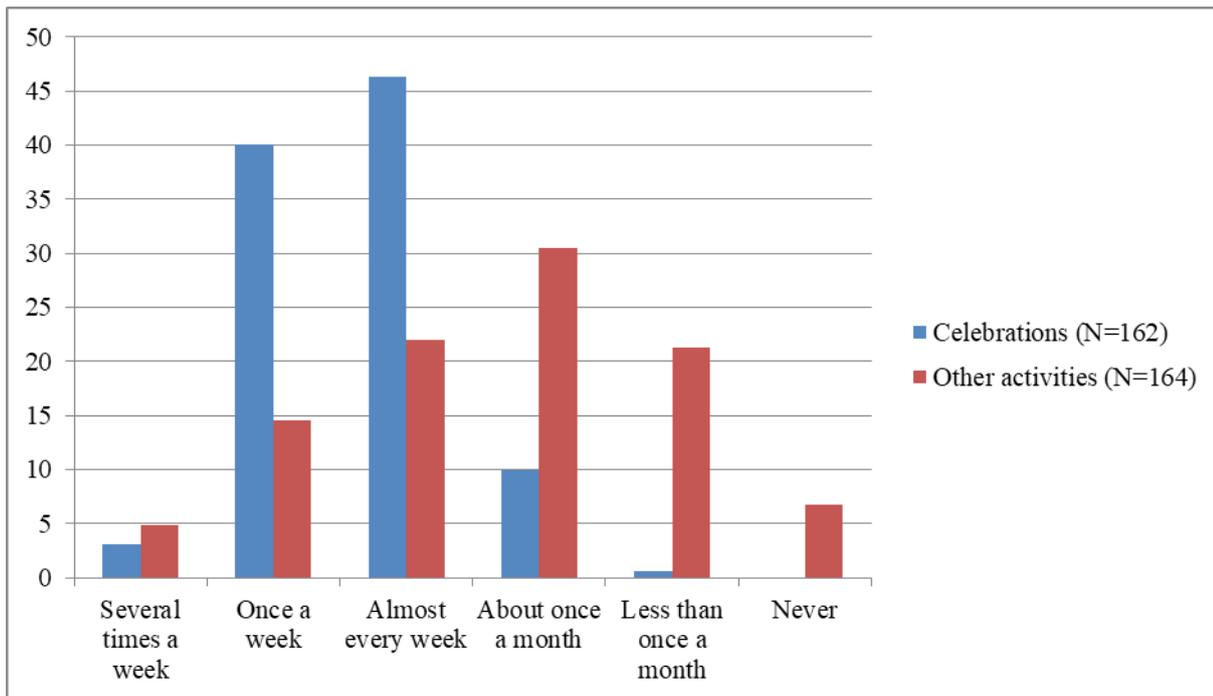

Figure 3: Activities Within the Vineyard

Small group meetings and other activities offered by the Vineyard are also regularly attended. The most frequent answer to this question was approximately once a month, which corresponds to the scheduled activities, offered at most of the Vineyard churches. Therefore, we can state that a large part of religious life takes place in one's own local community. Although the media produced here play only a marginal role, media are in general important for the core. They are an essential part of the celebration and the activities in the small groups, as stated above. Furthermore,

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[45]   One could argue this is due to the methodological approach. Since we have reached the members through the congregations, it is obvious that they also form the core. Two people, however, mentioned that they only come to the *Vineyard* from time to time and that their core community is a different one. It is also possible to think of an online community forming the core. But so far, findings indicate that online communities must be seen more as complementary to offline activities than as independent from them (Krüger 2012, p. 430). See Neumaier in this special issue.

[46]   It should be noted here that some Vineyard churches do not meet every week to celebrate.

communication media are extremely important in strengthening this core. These maintain social relationships and serve the organization (I will discuss this below in section 6.3.1).

6.3. Other forms of communalization

6.3.1. Activities outside the core

Around this core we find various other forms of communalization. One is attendance at activities provided by other churches. Compared to the core community activities, attendance at these activities is sporadic. More than half of the people surveyed said they attended activities at another church less than once a month. However, 13% said they attended one activity almost every week or even more often, while only 11% never attended another church's activity at all. If we examine more closely which other churches serve as alternative places of worship, we find the following results.[47] Some of the interviewees (26.3%) did not specify and simply responded, "different or multiple churches". Almost 40% attend activities at other evangelical churches (24% at charismatic churches and 16% at moderate evangelical churches).[48] Almost a fifth of participants said that they attend services at the 'national churches'.[49] Favre (2006, p. 268) also noted an enduring affiliation to the national church. In his study, a striking 58.3% of the Vineyard members in Switzerland declare such a dual affiliation.[50] In a way, this is astonishing, as the national churches themselves are not part of the evangelical milieu. However, this distinction appears limited to the organizational level. On an individual level, it is possible for a single person to be both part of the evangelical milieu and part of a national church. In her study of Evangelicals within Reformed parishes, Gachet (2014, p. 297) concludes that this type of belonging contributes to the vitality and spread of the milieu beyond its own borders.

We gained further information on other forms of communalization from the qualitative interviews. Our interviewees talked about a diversity of different communalization forms outside the Vineyard. They attend small group meetings, camps, training schools, and other kinds of events.

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[47] We asked which churches they visit; multiple answers were possible to this question.

[48] According to Stolz & Favre (2005, p. 171), in Switzerland one may distinguish three main branches in evangelicalism: 1) charismatic and Pentecostal Evangelicals; 2) moderate Evangelicals; and 3) fundamentalist Evangelicals. See also Favre 2006, pp. 105–106.

[49] It can be assumed that the interviewees are referring primarily to the Reformed Church (the predominant form of Protestantism in Switzerland, in the spirit of the Zwinglian and Calvinist Reformation) when they speak of the national Church. However, it is also possible that a minority attend services of the Catholic Church (see footnote 51). Five people (3%) even explicitly mentioned visiting a Roman Catholic church.

[50] Favre gives no information on how the members of the Vineyard are distributed among the national churches. For the Evangelicals as a whole, he states that 29.9% have dual affiliation. Of these, 93.8% are in a Reformed church and 6.2% in a Roman Catholic church. Furthermore, it should be noted that Favre's population is the Evangelicals. Of the 1111 respondents, 14 called themselves members of Vineyard (Favre 2006, p. 305). In this respect, eight people in our study claimed to have dual affiliation.

In summary, while some people are very active outside the core community, others take advantage of the activities offered by other communities only as a supplement. Nevertheless, only a minority of those surveyed take no part in activities outside the local community.

6.3.2. Media-based forms of communalization

There are different kinds of media-based forms of communalization that are important to the community because they provide information or offer a platform for discussion and exchange of ideas.[51] These include, for example, online communities, Internet forums, social media and WhatsApp groups. In our data, we have two questions dealing with media-based communalization in terms of communication between members. One involves how often they use social media to contact other members, and the other is about the use of text messaging applications such as WhatsApp (See fig. 4).
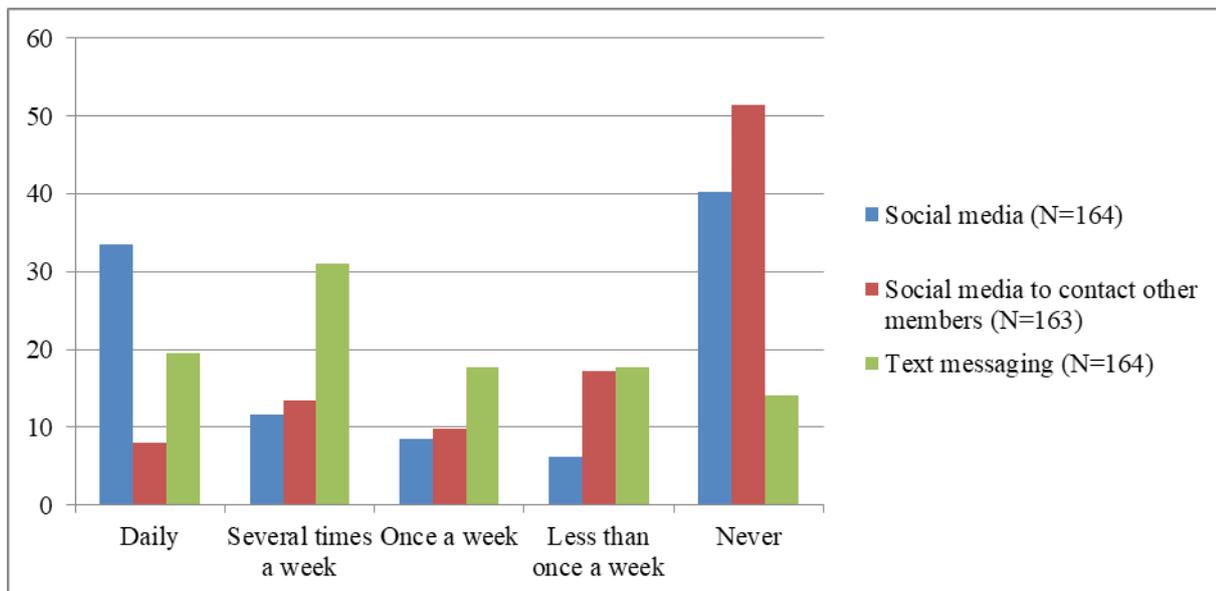

Figure 4: Media-based Communication Between Members

Generally, social media are not very popular among Vineyard members. Of the people surveyed, 40% do not use social media platforms at all, while 51% do not use them to get in contact with other members. Another 45% stated that they use social media several times a week or even daily, 21% to communicate with other members. Text messaging is the most popular way of

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[51] One might also wonder to what extent exchanges about media (discussions, recommendations) can be regarded as media-based communalization, but I will not address this here.

communicating within the group:[52] 19% text daily with other members and 31% text several times a week. Only 14% said they never text with other members of the Vineyard.

Table 1: Regression Models: Influences on Text Messaging with other Members

Independent variables	Age	General media use	Religious media use	Communali zation	Complete model
Age	- 0.022**				- 0.013
Playing games		- 0.153*			- 0.176*
Using the Internet to communicate		0.381**			0.225
Using social media		- 0.178*			- 0.116
Using social media to get in contact with other members		0.193***			0.410***
Visiting a Vineyard website			0.517***		0.370**
Listening to religious music			0.284**		0.237*
Using religious apps			0.140*		0.051
Partner in the Vineyard				- 0.104	0.057
Friends in the Vineyard				- 0.164	- 0.178
Participate in other activities of the Vineyard				0.241**	0.236**
Corrected R^2	0.052	0.254	0.163	0.056	0.459
Included variables	1	9	12	5	28
N	163	161	161	162	154

Regression coefficient significant to the *<0.05, **<0.01 and ***<0.001 level

For reasons of clarity, only variables that show a significant value in at least one model or those discussed in the text were included in this table. Not included in the table are the following variables: 1) general media use: watching television, reading newspapers, using the Internet for information, using the Internet for entertainment; 2) specific religious media use: using the Internet for religious information, using the Internet for information about religious activities, using the Internet to comment on religious topics, visiting another religious website, watching religious videos, listening to religious radio programs or podcasts, reading the Bible, reading religious magazines or books, reading or distributing flyers; 3) communalization: participating in a celebration, participating in activities from another church; 4) complete model: in addition to the aforementioned: gender.

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[52]   Nowadays, text messages are not only used for communication between two individuals, but are often used in groups (e.g., WhatsApp groups).

A first expectation is that text messages are especially popular among young people, the so-called 'digital natives'. This assumption was also supported by our qualitative interviews, during which we heard several times statements along the following lines: "Well, I don't use Facebook or WhatsApp, but the young people do." This hypothesis was tested with linear regression models (see tab. 1). At first sight, in a univariate model (here model 'Age') there is a significant effect of age on the use of text messages for communicating with other members. However, this model only explains 5.2% of the variance.

Moreover, the complete model shows no significant effect of age. Furthermore, it could also be expected that electronic communication within the community would be strongly influenced if a member's partner or best friends were also in the Vineyard, but the regression models (both the 'communalization' model and the complete model) show no significant effect in this regard.

There may be two reasons for this. First, it could simply be assumed that there is not enough electronic communication in these cases to have any influence. More likely, however, is that the question was interpreted to refer to communication with persons as Vineyard members, in which case everyday communication with friends or one's partner would not have been taken into account. This would mean that respondents assumed that we were only interested in text messages that were directly connected to the Vineyard. Other factors do have a strong impact. In the other models, which analyzed effects of general media use, the specific religious media use, and the participation rate, there were several significant influences on text messaging. In the complete model, the strongest and only highly significant influence on text messaging is the frequency of using "social media to get in contact with other members". These two items cover the same dimension in the sense of using electronic devices to communicate.[53] Here, we can only state that there are people who tend to communicate more in electronic ways than other people. Other items indicate that these persons also seem to be more integrated and active in the local community. The model shows significant effects for the use of a Vineyard website, listening to music, and the participation rate in Vineyard activities besides celebrations. Generally speaking, persons who visit a Vineyard website more often, listen more to worship music and participate more in activities with the group are also more likely to communicate electronically with other members. In the end, it seems that the media use reflects the commitment to the organized core of the community. The qualitative interviews provide further details showing how text messaging is used. Many interviewees reported being in a WhatsApp chat group. Most of them were in the context of a small group to which they belong.[54] The electronic communication therefore is often for organizational purposes, such as arranging

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[53] In certain cases (e.g. WhatsApp) the respondents may not have made this distinction between social media and text messaging.
[54] Several people told us they used to have a Facebook group, but switched to WhatsApp because it is more convenient.

when and where they will meet next time. Other groups are more concerned with the beliefs of the individuals and are about exchange of ideas and prayer requests. An extraordinary example of the different uses of WhatsApp chat groups is offered by Viviane, a 22-year-old member. She is in one chat with the youth group, another with the leadership team, and another with the band of her congregation. These chats mostly concern organizational issues. However, she also said:

> I've started an encouragement chat group. There are a few people from the Vineyard. They just get a Bible verse every day. Well, not every day, maybe every other day or every three days. Everybody does a bit when they have something. [...] I think we as Christians have a responsibility for one another, to encourage us in everyday life. Actually, to be nourished with good stuff and nice Bible verses. And often it's just beautiful; somebody writes, "That fits just perfect." Or well, also when God speaks through it, because God speaks that way.

Both the quantitative and qualitative data show a close link between the commitment to (the organized core) of the community and media-based forms of communalization. The more active a person is (for example in a leadership team or in activities for families, children or counseling), the more active he or she is in media. 'Normal members' seem to have less of that need for media.[55] In conclusion, it can be stated that there is a close interaction between media-based forms of communalization and participation in activities, especially for the organized core.

6.4. Social relationships

Social relationships are an important aspect of a community, and detecting them is essential for understanding and describing a community. Our data show how social relationships matter. We get a first impression of the importance of relationships when we look at how homogeneous the friendships are. Responses to the question, "How many of your three best friends are also in the Vineyard?" show that, on average, 1.27 of members' three best friends are also in the Vineyard. When we asked, "How many of your three best friends are committed Christians?" the average increased to 2.66. We can see that while fewer than half (42%) of the three best friends are in the Vineyard, almost all (89%) of their close friends are committed Christians.[56] So while only a small proportion of friendships are within the Vineyard, most of them are within the evangelical milieu. The question about partners generated similar results, with 68.9% of respondents saying that they

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[55] It is difficult to speak of 'normal members'. From the very beginning, visitors are encouraged not only to take part in the celebrations, but also to get involved.
[56] This is particularly astonishing when we consider that the evangelicals in Switzerland account for only about 2.5% of the population (Stolz et.al 2014a, p. 35). This is a strong indicator that friendships are consciously made within the milieu.

have a partner, 61.6% within the Vineyard and 7.3% outside. Of those who have a partner outside, 91.7% said that the partner is also a committed Christian. Only one person has a partner who is not a committed Christian. Regarding partnerships, the connection to the Vineyard is slightly stronger and the boundary of the milieu is even more clearly demarcated. In other words, just looking at the local community is not enough; the border is largely the same as that of the milieu.

Against a backdrop where concrete church belonging is of secondary importance (Stolz & Huber 2016),[57] social relationships are once again a decisive factor (see fig. 5). In response to the question, 'Why did you choose to attend this local church?',[58] 36.6% of those surveyed stated they came to the Vineyard because of friends. This is the most frequently mentioned reason followed by "Family", with 25%. It can, therefore, be stated that most members joined a particular church because of their social relationships, which can be taken as an indication that the individual person is not so free in the choice.

Social relationships can also influence media use. In the interviews, people told us that they recommend media or borrow media from each other. Moreover, during conversations reference is made to media (see Keppler 2010, p. 119). Through friendships, different media and their interpretations can circulate within the milieu in this way.[59]
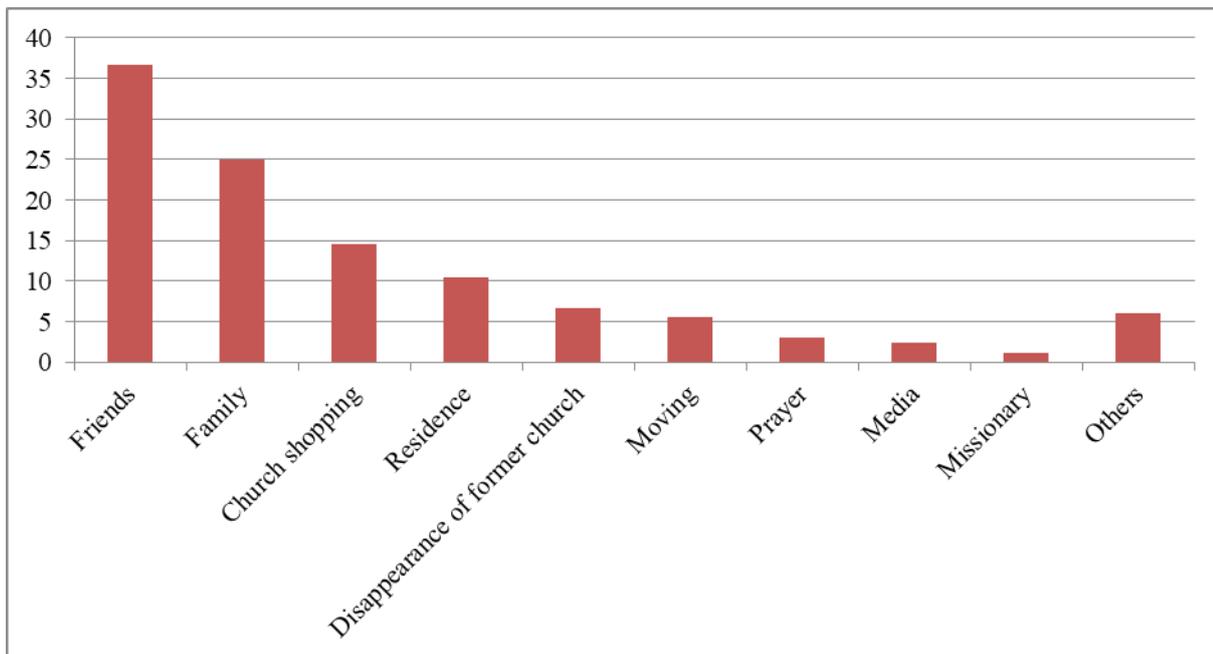

Figure 5: Reasons for Choosing this Church (N=164)

<p>57   See also section 2.</p>
<p>58   Multiple answers were possible.</p>
<p>59   As already mentioned in footnote 50, in the broadest sense, this can be understood as media-based communalization.</p>

Social relationships also have an effect at the institutional level, for example regarding the cooperation between different churches and/or other institutional actors. Usually there is cooperation at the regional level with another church when it comes to organizing, for example, a week of prayer or the distribution of flyers. Social relationships are also important at larger events. The Pentecost Conference 2017 of the Vineyard Bern is a good example of this. Of the 31 partners involved in the conference, only five were other Vineyard churches.[60] Some partners were other churches. Interestingly, the Freie Christengemeinde Aarau was involved, but the Vineyard Aarau was not. The leader of the Freie Christengemeinde introduced himself as a 'good friend' of the leader of the Vineyard Bern. This suggests that social relationships can be even more important than formal associations such as those that exist within the Vineyard. Another interesting fact about this conference is that media institutions were also partners. For example, livenet.ch, an online portal from and for Swiss Christians, was involved, as was fisherman.fm, a Roman Catholic radio and media platform for young Christians.[61]

The consideration of social relationships thus makes it possible to gain various insights into how a community is constituted. It is important not only to look at the homogeneity of a group, but also to examine whether there are institutional or even interactive links between the members (Hradil 1992, p. 43). The analysis of social relationships shows how communities within the evangelical milieu manifest at an individual as well as at the organizational level.

7 Conclusion

In this contribution, I have used the case study of the Vineyard to illustrate the role of media in the process of religious communalization. As an initial outcome, it may be stated that the analysis of media is a suitable methodological instrument for an investigation into the structures of a community. The media reflect various forms of communalization and expand the focus both within and beyond the local community. A question arises regarding the status of media-based forms of communalization in comparison to other forms. I have pointed out how media play a major role in celebrations as well as in the religious lives of individual members. However, the independence of media-based communalizations is still under debate. They are an important part of the community, but their role is apparently rather complementary. In order to capture the various forms of communalization, including the media-based ones, I developed the concept of a *multilayered*

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[60]   http://www.vineyard-konferenz.ch/infos/partner
[61]   Another interesting fact concerning media is that the registration for the conference came with the offer of a free issue of a Christian magazine published by the *Stiftung Christlicher Medien* (Foundation of Christian Media), such as *MOVO*, *DRAN.NEXT* or *Family*.

community. This concept allows both the structural and individual aspects of a community to be connected. On the one hand, different forms of organization can be equally taken into account (the congregation as well as the Bible study groups, the events, and even online communities). On the other hand, this concept is able to take into account the flexibility and diversity of individuals as well as the importance of different types of social relationships – whether they are face-to-face or media-based. This enables us to build a comprehensive understanding of community and has the advantage of not reducing community to just one of these dimensions. Above all, this concept allows us to include media at various levels. The *multilayered community* not only addresses media *for* communalization, but also *as* communalization.

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"The Light of a Thousand Stories"

Design, Play and Community in the Christian Videogame *Guardians of Ancora*

Tim Hutchings

Abstract

Understanding a videogame requires attention to the social dimensions of its production, its material form and its reception. Games are produced in communities of designers, played by communities of gamers, and accepted into families, households, and other communal settings. Christian games have often been designed with this wider community context in mind, advertised to families and churches as products that can help attract and retain new audiences.

This article focuses on the children's videogame *Guardians of Ancora* (GoA), produced by the Christian organization Scripture Union in 2015. We will use an interview with the product developer to explore the intent behind the game, and we will use an interview with a British volunteer at 'St. George's Church' to discover how the game has been used within a Christian community. GoA incorporates a degree of procedural rhetoric (Bogost 2007) into its design, but St. George's invites children to engage with the game's story and world in the context of a week of crafts, songs and other volunteer-led activities. Scholars of digital religion have long been fascinated by the relationship between online and offline religion, and the study of the social context of religious gaming offers a new way to approach this classic theme.

Keywords

1 Introduction

The study of religion and gaming is a particularly vibrant subfield of research on digital religion, which itself is a growing area of the field of media, religion and culture. Scholars to date have

primarily focused their attention on representations of religion in mainstream gaming, leaving aside the marketplace of games produced on behalf of and for the attention of religious communities. This article attempts to redress this imbalance through a case study of the Christian game *Guardians of Ancora*, published by Scripture Union England and Wales in 2015. *Guardians of Ancora* (henceforth GoA) is of interest as a high profile, relatively successful Christian game, produced outside the more intensively studied US Christian context, and as a game intended for children, a target audience that remains understudied in media, religion and culture. More importantly for this special issue, GoA allows us to study the material and symbolic contexts within which media are adopted into religious communities.

Scholars of digital religion have long been fascinated by the connection between online and offline religion (Campbell 2012). This article contributes to that tradition of research by exploring the relationship between a digital product – in this case, a game – and its context of use. As we shall see, GoA has been developed at least in part as a tool, theme and marketing opportunity for Christian churches, holiday clubs and school groups. Previous research has demonstrated that online religious activity tends to supplement participation in offline community activities (Hutchings 2017) rather than replace it. This article addresses a slightly different and less well-studied case, in which a local religious community temporarily adapts, absorbs and restructures itself around a digital product.

This article begins by surveying the limited body of research on Christian games. I will then introduce GoA in three sections, paying attention to its design, the experience of gameplay, and the material embeddedness of the game in communities of play. The article concludes by reflecting on all three sections in light of prior work on gaming and religion. As we shall see, GoA is intended to be a persuasive game that guides players toward faith in God, but its designers and the church leaders who implement it have different understandings of how that persuasive process works and what makes it effective.

To explore the design, purpose and use of the game, I draw in this article on two interviews. The first interview, with GoA product developer Maggie Barfield, took place by telephone in February 2018. I then located one church that had organized activities for children around GoA, and interviewed the leader of that church's holiday club in person in July 2018 to ask about their practices and perceptions of the game. This conversation, of course, reflects the experience of only one congregation, and directions for future research on GoA and Christian gaming will be indicated at the end of the article.

2 Literature Review: God and Games

Religious communities have been creating their own video games in large numbers since the 1980s. Vincent Gonzalez has extensively catalogued examples, and concludes that evangelical Christians have been particularly active in game production, "outpacing the efforts of all other religions" (Gonzalez 2014, abstract). Gonzalez has identified 1,652 examples of religious games as of November 2018 (available at religiousgames.org), of which he lists 1,087 as some variety of 'Christian' or 'biblical'.

Despite this rich history, scholarly engagement with games actually produced by and for religious communities has been rather limited. Far more academic energy has been expended on studying how religions and religiousness are reflected or represented in mainstream games, or applying concepts like ritual or myth drawn from the study of religion to the study of games, or using games to encourage new attention to the importance of playfulness, imagination, rules and competition in religious communities (for a summary, see Campbell et al. 2016). Some rare exceptions include work on Muslim games by Heidi Campbell (2010a) and Vit Sisler (2014) and Owen Gottlieb's (2017) recent article about his own experience designing a Jewish game, but these examples remain unusual.

In the Christian game sector, design is often motivated at least in part by evangelism. "Evangelical Christians perceive the proselytising potential of media" (Jacobs 2015, p. 88), even while remaining wary of its secular origins and perceived values. Games are popular, including among younger generations, and Christian game designers see an opportunity to deliver Christian content to audiences both inside and outside the Christian community. However, making a game that might in some way change players' minds is a significant design challenge. The few published studies of Christian games have identified serious tensions between this ambitious goal and the theological commitments and economic realities faced by Christian gaming companies, as we shall see below.

The goal of persuasion connects Christian games closely to the field of educational gaming, which also seeks to use games to form knowledge, understanding and character. Ian Bogost's influential work in this area introduced the concept of 'procedural rhetoric', which he defines as "a practice of using processes persuasively" (2007, p. 3). Bogost argues that games with an educational or moral purpose should not concern themselves only with delivering persuasive narratives, images and texts; gameplay can itself be persuasive. A game takes place within a world governed by rules, and the player must discover how this world works in order to succeed within it. Procedural rhetoric uses rules and processes to make claims about how the world functions.

Bogost applies his ideas to the Christian games marketplace, looking for evidence of procedural rhetoric. He begins with the company Wisdom Tree, which produced Nintendo games for evangelical Christian audiences in the 1990s. In Bogost's estimation, Wisdom Tree "did not proceduralize religious faith" (2007, p. 288) at all; rather, "they borrowed the operational logics of platform and adventure games, applying vaguely religious or biblical situations atop the familiar gestures of moving, running, or jumping". Fifteen years later, he argued, not much had changed: even in the early 2000s, "Christian game developers create religious games in the hopes of associating isolated Bible facts with videogame-playing target demographics, rather than simulating interaction with systems of belief" (p. 289).

Videogame historian Gabe Durham (2015) has published an oral history of Wisdom Tree and its 1991 product *Bible Adventures.* According to employees, the company's initial vision was to reach the "untapped market" of Christian gamers by finding ways to "turn famous stories from the Bible into games that children can have fun playing and learn scripture at the same time" (p. 37). In practice, however, their games were produced as cheaply and quickly as possible, disguising pre-existing games (including *Wolfenstein 3-D* (Durham 2015, p.122)) with Christian imagery and giving little thought to the theological significance of game mechanics, visuals or narrative (pp. 59, 91). "The cost of making games rose as technology progressed" (p. 134), eventually leaving the company unable to turn a profit from their niche Christian audience.

Bogost also considers a more recent and more ambitious Christian product, *Left Behind: Eternal Forces*, a real-time strategy game based a best-selling series of evangelical novels by LaHaye and Jenkins (1995), and launched for PCs in 2006. *Eternal Forces* throws players into the end times, challenging them to combat the forces of the Antichrist with spiritual conversion and lethal force. Bogost acknowledges that this game does make procedural claims about the effectiveness and difficulty of the spiritual practice of prayer, but he remains critical, arguing that "religion takes a back seat to military strategy" (Bogost 2007, p. 291). The game reflects only a generic form of religion, he claims, and its creators "have withdrawn considerably from the clear religious specificity of their source materials" (p. 291).

Religious scholars have also examined *Left Behind*, with somewhat different results. Rachel Wagner (2012) and Stephen Jacobs (2015) find significant parallels and resonances between the structure of the game and the end-times theology of the books. Bogost assumes that military strategy is separate from authentic religion, but this understanding is much too simplistic. Some Christians are drawn to games precisely by their violence – a point also emphasized by Shanny Luft (2014, p. 159) in his study of evangelical players of mainstream games (p.159). The *Left Behind* games divide the world into good and evil and instruct the player to fight for the cause of God. Wagner argues that this limited narrative compels the user to play like a believer: "[O]ne cannot complete *Left Behind: Eternal Forces* without at least imaginatively buying into this dualistic

system of good and evil, which is fully integrated into the game's procedural rhetoric" (2012, p. 170). Similar theological echoes can be found in the binary worldview of many games, and Gonzalez (2014) and Wagner (2012b) have both extensively explored the ambivalent appeal of first-person shooters to evangelical audiences. These games invite the player to act out a form of spiritual warfare, often against demonic opponents, even while they provoke Christian fears of the malevolent influence of media violence.

Wagner and Jacobs also draw attention to the ways in which theological commitments can operate against the needs of a game experience. Jacobs argues that *Left Behind* is "not structured like a game" at all, as the theology of the authors ensures that "there is effectively only one successfully prescribed course through the game, and only one possible resolution" (Jacobs 2015, p. 99). The player appears to have a wealth of choices, but this is an illusion: deviation from the correct path leads only to defeat. Wagner has explored this problem of inflexibility in several of her writings (2010, 2012), arguing that the role of prophecy in the Christian understanding of biblical history encourages a "preference for narrative over game" (2010, p. 48). For example, if the death of Jesus on the cross was pre-destined, revealed in advance and predicted both in the Hebrew Bible and in Jesus's own ministry, then "tampering with the story, especially in terms of imagining that things could have unfolded otherwise, is not an option" (p. 48).

This brief survey has highlighted a few key themes of scholarship on Christian games. Games often aim to introduce new audiences to Christian stories, but they have been criticized for a lack of investment in the kinds of procedural rhetoric that could (according to Bogost, at least) make them genuinely persuasive. Christian gameplay has often copied mainstream gameplay mechanics, a tendency compounded by the high cost of game development. Game developers have also been unwilling for theological reasons to risk allowing players to change sacred narratives and characters. However, the deeper moral structures of good and evil present in many mainstream games lend themselves particularly well to particular evangelical and fundamentalist views of the cosmos. With this in mind, even a derivative action game can invite the player to experience a theological argument about the nature of reality.

What is missing from these works is consideration of the social context of Christian games: the way they operate not as isolated texts but within networks of family members, church congregations and peer friendships. The remainder of this article will explore these themes through a new, community-oriented case study, asking how the logics of Christian theology and game development come together in an example produced far away from the American context described by all the scholars above.

3 Designing *Guardians of Ancora*

Guardians of Ancora (GoA) is a mobile game for phones and tablets, available as an app in Apple, Android and Kindle versions. It was launched in 2015 by the England and Wales branch of the charity Scripture Union, an international organization founded in 1867 which now describes its mission as "actively introducing children, young people and families to Jesus and helping them to meet God through the Bible and prayer" (Scripture Union n.d. a). GoA's target audience is aged 8–11. The game is still being expanded at the time of writing, with new missions, supporting materials, and translations into additional languages published each year. The exact number of downloads and active users is unclear, but Scripture Union announced in summer 2017 that the game had been played one million times (Mbakwe 2017).

The product developer for GoA is Maggie Barfield, who agreed to a telephone interview with me in February 2018. According to Barfield, the story of the game began with a completely different assignment: to revamp Scripture Union's line of printed Bible study materials for children. She quickly realized that "the market wasn't there for that kind of product": children just didn't want more print resources, however good they were. So instead, she began asking a new question: "What *would* get children into the Bible, and the Bible into children?" More specifically,

> What could we do that would hit that goal of children being able to encounter God, meet Jesus, and for it to be something where […] it wouldn't just be a head knowledge thing but it would be where they're able to respond in some way to what they're finding out?

Barfield's answer, after "a lot of thinking and searching and researching and talking to people", was that children were "doing stuff online, or digital stuff, or playing games". There might be scope, she felt, for a game to encourage "the sort of immersive quality" of "something where you're really involved", going beyond "hitting a button at random" to demand real commitment.

To achieve this level of engagement, the game would have to be truly excellent – Barfield's goal was to produce something "that was good enough to sit on the App Store", a game that children would play it because it was good, "not because they're being pushed into doing it because it's a Christian thing and mum or dad or somebody at church says you ought to". In fact, the game had to be so good that even non-Christian children would play it for fun: "What we wanted was a game that any child could play, and that wherever they were in their faith it would give them an opportunity to kind of move towards God from having played it."

Developing this kind of game would require more expertise than Scripture Union could offer, so Barfield partnered with Dubit, a game company that specializes in development and research for children. Like Wisdom Tree's games (Durham 2015, p. 57), GoA would be built through a

partnership between Christian and non-Christian teams. Unlike Wisdom Tree's games, GoA would be an expensive production: Barfield wasn't willing to be specific, but she revealed that the budget included "a ridiculous number of noughts", and that the team had been "really blessed with a major donor who's been with us from the start". In fact, Barfield dismissed the Christian games marketplace altogether:

> Very few of them actually work as games. They are worthy and they are very Christian but they don't have that mathematical edge, so you don't have risk and you don't have chance, you don't have balance. You don't have the things that make a game a game. […] I drew no inspiration from anything in the Christian game world. What we were inspired by was the secular games, and the quality of them.

The GoA team drew on Christian expertise in the theology and spiritual formation of children, but when it came to game design, "What we were looking at was the secular wisdom, not the Christian wisdom."

GoA introduces children to stories from the life of Jesus, set within the following framing narrative:

> The city of Ancora used to glow with the light of a thousand stories. Now these tales are gone and the Spire grows dim, but some still search for stories, to relight the Spire once more. They are called the Guardians of Ancora! (Scripture Union n.d. b)

The home screen of the app (Fig 1) displays an image of Ancora, which sprawls across a green hillside. White stone buildings glowing with light are connected by a network of fountains, lakes and aqueducts. At the heart of the city is the Spire, a tall tower pointing a finger of light into the sky. The player clicks through from this landscape into the world of the Bible by selecting the Spire and choosing one of a series of 'easy', 'normal' or 'hard' missions, each transporting the player into an episode from the life of Jesus.

Figure 1: The City of Ancora. © Scripture Union

In our interview, Barfield explained that many biblical allusions and parallels are hidden in this scene, from "the city of God in Revelation… and the river running through it" to "Jesus of course being the light of the world in John 8". These allusions are not explicitly marked, but "we're turning these biblical pictures into an actual picture that people can inhabit and play with". The player's task is to discover Bible stories to keep the Spire shining, and this too has theological significance:

> What we were looking for is that quality where the player has an influence on the world in which they inhabit, and it would be a positive influence, and so the good that they do has an impact on the world that they live in. […] Your job is to find these stories and bring them back and share them with everybody else, and the light, the literal light, because we turned it from being a metaphor into a literal light, the light of God's word shines brighter in the world because of you. So it's giving that role and responsibility, that you are an important person in the world. So it's like practicing for being in the real world outside. The real world is a better place because you are there, and if you have God's light shining in you, that is having an impact on the world around you. So it's kind of doing that in the digital world; it's like a rehearsal in that sense.

In its current form, the game explains very little about Ancora. The light from the Spire is supposedly going out, but within the game itself the player never discovers why this is happening, and there is no final end to the game in which the Spire can finally be cured. As Barfield puts it, "You have to keep going, the light fades, you have to keep going out again." When I asked Barfield what this darkness represented, she laughed away the question: children "don't really notice the fading thing. They're much more interested in lighting it up."

Scripture Union did at one point intend to build a much more elaborate story around the world of Ancora. In the App Store, the description of the game explains that the city "is still recovering from the attack of the Great Shadow, Ancora's greatest enemy", but this character is never seen or referred to in the game itself. In our interview, Barfield admitted that "if I had a limitless budget, the world of Ancora would be more engaging than it is. […] This is where budget starts to influence what you'd really like to do. As we've already said, it's cost a crazy amount of money. We needed a simpler story than that."

Barfield also suggested another reason for Ancora's simplicity: the framing narrative just wasn't needed. Through focus group research, the GoA team discovered something "quite striking":

> We didn't need to invent an Ancora story that would be like a new story for [children] in which they would trip over a Bible story. They had no clue about Bible stories. And so we were doing a lot of research with […] non-faith children, and they were as interested in the Bible story as anything else. There was no sense of being anti, they just hadn't got a clue; they didn't know anything about them.

For an audience of British children, Barfield concluded, there was no need to "dress everyone up in, oh, you know, medieval garb or Westerns or spacemen or anything" – the Bible stories themselves were already strange, unfamiliar and exotic. To catch the interest of child audiences, it was quite enough to "present it as, 'Here's a story from a long time ago.'"

4 Playing *Guardians of Ancora*

To get a better sense of how GoA actually works, we now turn to the game itself, starting with its library of biblical missions. As of November 2018, the following stories from 'the Saga' can be played. Easy Mode includes two stories: 'Jesus and the Fishermen' (in which Jesus calls his first disciples) and 'Messages from Angels' (in which Mary is told that Jesus will be born). Normal Mode includes six stories: 'Angels and Shepherds' (Jesus is born), 'Jesus Feeds a Crowd' (a miracle story), 'Jesus and the Roman Officer' (a healing story), 'Jesus is Alive' (the resurrection story),

'How to talk with God' (Jesus teaches his disciples how to pray), and 'The Way to the Cross' (the crucifixion story, beginning with the confusion of the disciples after Jesus has been arrested). Hard Mode includes the final three stories: 'Jesus and Jairus' (a healing story), 'Jesus Forgives and Heals' (a healing story), and 'At Simon Peter's House' (a healing story). Each story is divided into one, two or three chapters, each playable separately, adding up to 24 chapters in total.

This selection of stories covers some of the essential milestones in the Christian story of the life of Jesus, including his birth, teaching, miracles, death and resurrection. These stories are grouped by difficulty but are not otherwise laid out in an easily comprehensible order, and they do not progress chronologically or thematically. They emphasize short dramatic events like miracles, particularly healings, rather than the more language-heavy episodes of Jesus's teaching or his parables. In this sense, the game offers a very different syllabus from the usual content that might be covered by a picturebook, storybook or television show aimed at Christian children (see for example Bottigheimer 1996).


Figure 2: A Gameplay Screenshot from Guardians of Ancora. © Scripture Union

When the player travels from Ancora into the world of Jesus, everything visually changes (Figure 2). The landscape is now desert orange, the style of buildings and costumes has switched to an impression of first-century Palestine, and the animation style changes to a more solid 3D. The player's task in each of these stories is simple and consistent: to follow a line of dots, running, jumping, climbing ladders and sliding down ropes. Much of the game involves following a path across rooftops, but the player may also end up climbing the masts of ships, scaling scaffolding in a building site, or journeying through underground mines and tunnels. There are only three controls: left, right, and an action key that switches automatically between jump, scale ladder, slide on rope or turn handle when the player comes close to an object that needs to be activated. Jumps must be perfectly timed, or the player will plunge to their death and reset to the last checkpoint. Simple puzzles may involve turning a handle to raise or lower a platform, and in 'Jesus Feeds a Crowd' the player takes a basket of food past a series of hungry people, but otherwise the mechanics of the game are unchanging. Different missions are assigned different difficulty modes, but these are distinguished only by the increasing length of missions. When the player reaches the end of their mission, they return to the Ancora homescreen, where the dots they have collected become 'Firebugs' and pour into the Spire to power the city.

The narrative told in each part of the Saga unfolds in three ways: through animated cut scenes featuring conversations between non-player characters, triggered when the player reaches certain stages in the game; through the comments of non-player character bystanders overheard as the player runs past; and through the commentary of characters from the framing world of Ancora, who watch the player complete their task and give their own personal responses to the action. The Ancoran comments (visible for example in Figure 2) can be read or heard, but characters within the biblical setting speak only in text speech bubbles. Jesus's presence is overwhelming, even when he isn't visible onscreen: every person in each town the player visits seems to be gossiping excitedly about his latest exploits.

Throughout each gameplay session the player is repeatedly addressed by the game and its characters, calling for a response to the stories depicted. The first time the game is opened each day, the first window features the Guildmaster, who confronts the player with a blunt question about their personal faith before allowing them to proceed, for example: "Do you think it's important to go to church?" In the world of Ancora, the Spire is surrounded by many other buildings that the player can choose to visit, and these also call for responses. The city includes the Theatre of the Saga (featuring animated songs and videos that correspond to particular quests), the Hall of Memory (a timeline showing which year each biblical story supposedly occurred in), the Guild (featuring Bible quizzes and personality tests), City Plaza (where players can create images to keep or to share with other players), the Guardian Grounds (where characters can change outfits, admire their trophies and take selfies), Antiqua's Boat (where items can be purchased to make levels

easier), Shiner's House (where a small physics mini-game can be played), and Swift's Tower (a help center). Each of these locations is associated with a non-player character with their own unique look and style of dress, ranging from robes to steampunk goggles. In addition to this already crowded map, exclamation marks pop up across the landscape to indicate a quest or a quiz, or to ask for a response to a question about one of the Bible stories.

Barfield described GoA not as an educational game, but as a game "underpinned with solid educational stuff", particularly through this variety of demands and interactive options. She identified the different activity options as evidence of the 'learning styles' approach to education, giving players the chance to choose to be active, to create pictures, to read texts, or to explore their environment. According to Barfield, GoA commissioned analysis of player activity, and this showed four main player groups: 'gamers', who were very active; 'socializers', who used the creative area; 'readers', who prefer reading Bible stories; and 'meanderers', who combined these approaches. Based on this information, GoA can tailor its prompts to the perceived needs of each player. For example, gamer players are "busy racing around", but "if we want to do perhaps some more reflective stuff as well, then we need to do something to kind of encourage them for a while to stop racing around and do something a bit quieter". If a player spends more time in the reading areas, then a different response might be needed: "More and more you get a prompt, a question that says something like, well, 'Simon Peter was really surprised by Jesus. Has Jesus ever done anything that surprised you?' And then you go off and you respond to that."

5 *Guardians of Ancora* and Christian Community

In our interview, Barfield describes GoA as a game that any child could play, "wherever they were in their faith", with the overarching goal "for their faith to be forming in a Godwards direction". Barfield was adamant that this formation can be achieved through the game environment itself, in a solo play context, and that GoA "is doing that for plenty of children" already. However, even solitary play can take place within social networks of support and encouragement. Some children are encouraged to play GoA at home by their parents, and Barfield also reports that "we have a lot of grandparents who have tried to learn to play the game so they can teach it to their grandchildren". Scripture Union has also developed a suite of resources and projects designed to encourage shared contexts of play outside the home, and we now turn to explore how the game can be adopted into communal settings.

According to Barfield, Scripture Union's own teams "have been using it a lot in what they call pop-up missions, so they'll turn up in an agricultural show and have a stand there and children

can come and play". Scripture Union produces guides and resources to help groups run holiday camps and summer clubs based on GoA, and Barfield reports that "we know there've been hundreds and thousands of clubs like that". However, she claims, it is in schools that the game has been most successful at reaching non-Christian audiences:

> What everybody who has reported it has been finding, is that in a school context it attracts the non-Christian children, so at least 80% of the children who turn up for a club won't have any faith background at all, so of course […] schools workers […] love that, [because] they're actually having the opportunity to work with the children they've been desperate to get hold of forever.

Barfield suggests that the game transforms both the appeal and the educational experience of a Christian children's club by disrupting the hierarchical relationship between teacher and students. In the setting of a gaming session, children gain confidence from their mastery of the game and begin to ask their own questions about faith:

> [I]nstead of it being, "I'm the club leader and I'm going to tell you about Jesus", or "We're going to read a story about Jesus", or "We're going to play something", what you have is the children setting the pace. They're going to be much better at playing the game than any adult in the room, but on the other hand the adults are the ones that'll know much more stuff about Jesus. And what they report again and again is that you'll have a complete levelling within the group, so you stop having leaders and pupils and everybody comes as equals, because you sit together and the child can play the game really well and will start asking questions, or making comments, and the leaders aren't as good at playing the game but they have those opportunities to be responding to what the children actually are asking and wanting to know. So instead of hammering them with a Bible message, the message is emerging from the children. "How could Jesus do that?" "Is it really possible for someone to come back to life? How can that happen?" "My gran died – if I pray really hard, will she come back to life?" The sort of questions that aren't going to emerge in a sort of standard hierarchical situation. So it's much more meeting as equals, and the sorts of conversations that flow either between the children or between the children and the adults are very different.

This explanation focuses on the educational impact of actually playing the game, but reflects only one of the ways in which GoA has been adopted into Christian communities. GoA has also been deployed in more intensive settings, including residential events and week-long summer courses, and a lot more is involved in these events than just playing the game. GoA is not just a game: it is also a world, a theme, and a brand. As Barfield points out, "When you go to an outdoor pursuit center you can really theme the whole holiday brilliantly as an Ancora experience." Scripture Union's own holiday camp, 'Ancora Explorers', offers "the whole kind of parkour ropes

course jumping around thing", using Ancora primarily not as a gaming experience but as a source of imagery, characters, costumes and ideas for children's activities.

Soon after I interviewed Maggie Barfield, I learned of a church that had used one of the GoA holiday club packages. I contacted the church and received permission to interview one of the holiday club leaders to find out more about their experiences. This is of course only one example, but a brief discussion of my conversation with a member of this church offers a chance to balance Barfield's presentation against comments from someone independent from the GoA company who had tried using the product in their own community.

St. George (not its real name) is a large Church of England parish in a small city. It is popular with university students, and is known for its evangelical theology. The church website does not mention 'evangelicalism' by name, but promises 'biblical preaching' and outlines a vision focused on four kinds of transformation: discipleship, evangelism, social justice and service to the local community. The website mentions children frequently, promising four childcare options for different age groups during the main Sunday service, in addition to regular family worship services.

Anna, my interviewee (not her real name), first discovered GoA through its advertisements at a major Christian conference. When she decided that her daughter was "probably old enough to understand it", she suggested she might give it a try. Anna's daughter normally prefers playing *Sims*-like games of dressing up and "manipulating characters in real-life settings", and Anna recalls that she "had to help her jump" some of the trickier stages of GoA, but GoA proved popular and quickly joined the rotation of regularly played games. Anna heard that other churches in her city had tried using GoA's holiday club materials, so she recommended that her own church might like to try them as well.

The church decided to run the second GoA club, an introduction to the gospel called 'Treasure Seekers'. On Scripture Union's website, 'Treasure Seekers' promises "a flexible programme" supported by "everything you need to run a holiday club – including multimedia downloads, craft ideas and templates, small group discussion ideas, creative prayer suggestions and more" (SU 2017). Churches can download free posters to advertise their course, drama scripts for Ancoran framing narratives and Bible stories, animated Bible story videos, explanations of which Ancoran character each team member is supposed to be and how to create their costume, MP3 tracks of the GoA theme song with suggested dance moves, and many other kinds of resources.

'Treasure Seekers' at St. George's attracted a group of 25–30 children, aged between 4 and 11, all but two of whom were from churchgoing families. The church youth team used many of these resources, singing the theme song, dressing up in Ancoran costumes and theming each day around a hunt for a lost 'treasure' – like "an angel, a foam hand, [or] an arrow, which my husband made out of wood". Each treasure related in some way to a Bible story, and the children first had to

guess what the object might be, then learn the story, play games and build crafts related to the story, and finally find the object itself somewhere in the church. The team created their own Spire as the centerpiece for the week, building a tower from garden canes ("It's taller than I am!" Anna recalled) and hiding an LED bulb with a dimmer switch inside. The tower grew a little brighter at the high point of every day, when the children successfully completed the day's mission and added their new treasure to a special plinth the team had constructed in the church.

The youth group also adapted Scripture Union's materials considerably to fit their skills and aims. They cut down the five-day program to four days, shortened each day's session, renamed a character from Antiqua to Fabulo to suit the balance of male and female team members, cut out the suggested drama sketches, and added a new Ancoran exercise routine. The children particularly liked Fabulo, so "we got a chant going with 'hashtag Fabulo!' every time we saw him". Anna played the character Swift, who helped to introduce each day's task, but admitted that her costume was "not anything like the app": "We just had trousers, a white shirt and we had a sash, bought some shiny material, and every day we wore something different on our head, so one day we had massive sunglasses, something like that." The volunteers had quickly realized that "the costumes would be too hard to create with our limited resources" and decided to "do our own thing" instead. Scripture Union's recommendations seemed to Anna to assume a much bigger church with more children and more volunteers. For example, the course materials recommended "having your main space and then the Hall of Memories being somewhere separate", in a second location where the children could store each day's treasures. St. George's did not have the space, "so we just used the communion table and put them on a plinth along there each day". The team also ruthlessly jettisoned any GoA material they didn't think was good enough, adding their own alternatives to replace songs and activities that seemed repetitive, off-topic or ill-suited to their audience.

GoA provided the holiday club with a theme, a set of characters, a list of suggested activities, and a set of downloadable videos and songs. It also provided a storyline that Anna found "really confusing", involving Firebugs (represented at St. George's by "a glass vase with some fairy lights in it") that somehow functioned as points, decorations, and active characters whispering clues to the team leaders all at once. One thing it did not provide, however, was the actual game. The church once had an iPad, Anna remarked, but that was stolen. Instead of playing the game in the club, the team chose to tell the children about it at the end of the week, sending them home with something to continue exploring. At least a few parents had reported that their children "really enjoyed" playing the game at home because "they enjoyed the adventure bit of it, the running, the jumping". The church congregation includes some ordinands training for Christian ministry, and this group of families reported that their children had used the GoA idea to invent their own game on the way home:

> Apparently the children were then playing around a lamp post, saying it was a Spire of Light, and went in to get their Bibles and read them quickly to make the Spire of Light shine brighter [laughs].

Without the actual game, what did GoA offer to St. George's? Logistically, of course, the team appreciated how easy the course was to run, because so much of the publicity and course material had been created in advance. For Anna, the fantasy theme "captured the imagination" of children of all ages. The characters were "silly", a word Anna used repeatedly in the interview with great approval. Ancora was also "gender-neutral", because it didn't fit into the children's expectations of boy things and girl things: Ancora is "nothing like anything else they know", and so it remains "accessible by all". Most importantly, the basic concept of saving Ancora was compelling and easy to grasp: "I think they enjoyed the idea of working towards helping the city of Ancora become brighter; they got into that idea, and they didn't mind about the firebugs being different things. It was just the leaders, who were like, 'We can't understand this!'"

6 Discussion and Conclusion

This article has addressed a significant gap in the field of research on religion and gaming, drawing new attention to the marketplace of games created on behalf of and used within religious communities. As we have seen, previous scholarship on this issue has focused on a small number of games created in the United States, particularly for fundamentalist audiences interested in theologies of spiritual warfare and end-times preparation. New studies are needed of examples from different regions and theological contexts to test, build on and expand our understanding of how these games are made, how they work, to whom they appeal, and what they are trying to achieve. We also need new attention to how religious games are used in shared contexts, because these are not just products deployed for solitary or multiplayer use. As this case study has shown, games can be adapted and adopted into entire religious communities, from households and extended families to schools, clubs and congregations. Attention to designers, games and players can only capture part of the significance of a game like *Guardians of Ancora*. GoA also shapes and is reshaped by the practices, aspirations, material culture and social networks of congregations like St. George's.

This exploration of GoA has considered three areas: its design, its gameplay, and its reception. In each case, I have uncovered parallels to previous literature and new findings.

The first section on design used an interview with product developer Maggie Barfield to explore her understandings of the game's aims and strategies. According to Barfield, the game's purpose is not primarily to teach Bible stories but to use those stories to encourage the player to

"encounter God". Barfield is also determined to produce a game that can succeed in its own right, as an excellent product that children will be drawn to playing, and so GoA draws on the 'secular wisdom' of contemporary game development. Barfield emphasized her own understanding of what makes a game worthwhile, dismissing rival Christian games for their ungamelike lack of challenge and balance. At the same time, the game has clearly been limited by its own budget and time constraints, leaving elements of the Ancoran storyline underdeveloped. This is an excellent example of what I have elsewhere called *mediatized religious design* (Hutchings 2017), a process in which the production of religious technologies is informed not only by religious values (as in Heidi Campbell's (2010b) 'religious-social shaping of technology'), but also by an ongoing effort to study and understand the inherent logic of new and unfamiliar media – more in keeping with the mediatization thesis applied to the study of religion by Stig Hjarvard (2011).

The second section, on gameplay, echoed some of the older findings of Bogost (2007), Wagner (2010) and others. Like many Christian games, GoA adapts popular game mechanics of running, jumping and collecting dots, without trying to find more ambitious ways to proceduralize Christian faith. The game is strikingly reliant on overheard dialogue, perhaps for budget reasons, often preferring to let the player overhear background characters discussing an event which has just happened instead of actually showing that event or allowing the player to participate in it. Nonetheless, we can still argue that GoA uses procedure to teach key aspects of the faith it wants players to explore. Instead of the violent spiritual binary identified in Christian war games by Wagner (2012) and others, GoA sends players on a quest to change the world by learning the Bible – the same promise that evangelical churches like St. George's offer to their congregations every week.

In the third section, I ventured into the larger communal contexts within which the game is received, played and discussed. It is here, of course, that we return most obviously to the theme of community that motivates this special issue. The connection between online and offline community has been discussed exhaustively in the field of digital religion, but GoA's embeddedness in embodied and material community uncovers a new dimension to this relationship, particularly for the study of religion and gaming. GoA can be played as a game, but it is also designed as the centerpiece of an expanding constellation of activities and media. For the club team at St. George's, the gameplay of GoA was less valuable than its overarching story, which provided ideas for costumes, church decorations and activities, as well as publicity, videos and songs. Children encountered GoA not just as a digital app but as an invitation for physical play, from dress-up and crafts to dance and exercise routines.

Barfield and Anna both suggested that the game functioned to support and transform relations inside Christian families and communities, although – perhaps unsurprisingly – Barfield's claims were more ambitious. GoA offers a new, non-biblical world and cast of characters to catch the

interest of children and within which they can then be introduced to 'the Saga', the story of Jesus. Barfield has suggested that such complicated nesting of narratives might be unnecessary for reaching many children today, because the Bible is already unfamiliar to them and can be encountered as something new. However, but the novel frame was appreciated by Anna and the holiday club team at St. George's. Barfield also proposed that playing games could defuse the stifling sense of hierarchy between leaders and children, generating new opportunities for conversations about faith. For Anna, the novelty of the setting of Ancora was more useful in destabilizing the hierarchies of age and gender internalized by children themselves, freeing everyone to enjoy the week's activities.

I conclude this article by calling for further research on the specific case study of *Guardians of Ancora*, on the wider marketplace of Christian games for children, and on the place of games within religious communities. This article is based on two interviews, and conversations with GoA's Christian funders and non-Christian development partners are likely to reveal new perspectives on the game's development and its achievements. My observations of the use of GoA within church contexts particularly calls out for future expansion. Ethnographic work within families, schools, churches and holiday clubs could be used to find out more about exactly how a game like this can support or change patterns of religious socialization. The materiality of this example also calls for further study: how are other games being used to provide themes and activities in shared contexts? How are other Christian communities working to adapt and domesticate media products? How are the internal dynamics of a religious community affected by the adoption of these media products? Future studies could also engage with child players of this and other Christian games to explore their own perceptions and responses, offering a valuable counterpoint to the adult perspectives analyzed in this article. The study of religion and gaming is flourishing, but there are still many new areas to explore.

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