



The Digital Religion Yearbook

2022

The Network for
New Media, Religion
& Digital Culture Studies

The Digital Religion Yearbook 2022

Edited by Heidi A Campbell

Editorial Assistance by Grace Bentien and Emmy Riordan

(cc) 2022 BY-NC-SA

This Creative Commons license lets others cite and build upon this work non-commercially, as long as they credit this original work and license their new creations under the identical terms. Derivative works may not be sold for profit.

Digital Religion Publications

An Imprint of the *Network for New Media, Religion & Digital Culture Studies*

Visit our website at www.digitalreligion.tamu.edu

The Digital Religion Yearbook 2022

The aim of the Digital Religion Yearbook is to spotlight important research, emerging scholars and top contributions to the growing field of Digital Religion studies. The yearbook is organized and published by the Network for New Media, Religion and Digital Culture Studies.

The Digital Religion Yearbook 2022

Table of Contents

1) Director's Note	Page 3
2) Annual Essay: An Argument for Engaging Hypermediation Theory within Studies of Digital Religion By Dr. Giulia Evolvi, 2022 Digital Religion Research Award Winner	Page 4
3) Top 10 Articles in Digital Religion Research for 2022	Page 9
4) Scholars to Watch	Page 14
5) Top Student Thesis in Digital Religion Studies for 2022	Page 19
6) Publications by the Network for New Media, Religion and Digital Culture Studies in 2022	Page 21

Director's Note

Welcome to the second edition of The Digital Religion Yearbook

This publication was envisioned by the Network for New Media, Religion and Digital Studies in order to highlight important research and scholarship being produced in the increasingly diverse, interdisciplinary and international field of Digital Religion Studies. I have been privileged to be part of the first wave of researchers in this area. Over the last twenty years, I have been amazed at the growth and diversification of the research seeking to document and analyze the myriad of ways that religion is increasingly transported online, as well translated and transformed as it engages with a variety of internet technologies and digital platforms.

Yet even someone like myself, who has spent nearly 30 years reading and researching in this area, I am finding it increasingly difficult to keep up with the latest research in the field, which has expanded beyond the initial disciplines of Communication, Sociology of Religion and Religious Studies to include scholars in Economics, Political Science, Computer Science, Geography and Informatics. I often tell my students that when I graduated with my PhD from New College at the University of Edinburgh in 2002, after completing a thesis exploring the rise of religious community online, that I owned the entire literature in the study of religion and the internet. It amounted to three large binders of articles and less than 20 books, which filled about three feet of space on my bookshelf. Now, in 2021 and 2022 alone, there are some 10,000 articles that have been published on themes related to religion, spirituality, the internet and digital media.

The Digital Religion Yearbook seeks to help scholars stay on top of this growing literature by spotlighting interesting articles and exceptional research produced each year. We draw attention not only to the top research articles and dissertations published annually, but emerging scholars in the field whose work we invite readers to consider. We especially will spotlight the work and contribution of our annual Digital Religion Research Award winner to the field, such as this year's awardee Dr Giulia Evolvi from Erasmus University in the Netherlands. We also use this as a space to spotlight the current research undertaken by the Network for New Media, Religion and Digital Studies team and recent publications. Overall, we hope the Yearbook will become your annual go-to resource for helping to stay up-to-date on the exciting work being produced in Digital Religion Studies and latest lines of inquiry being explored.

Heidi A Campbell, Director

Annual Essay

An Argument for Engaging Hypermediation Theory within Studies of Digital Religion

By Dr. Giulia Evolvi

Each yearbook will open with an “annual essay” from a notable scholar in the field of Digital Religion Studies. This inaugural issue features an essay by Heidi A Campbell, Director of the Network for New Media, Religion and Digital Culture Studies, a leading scholar in the field.

This year’s essay honors the work of the 2022 Digital Religion Research Award Winner, Dr. Giulia Evolvi, Lecture in Media and Communication at Erasmus University in Rotterdam. Dr. Evolvi won this year’s award based on her article “Religion and the internet: Digital Religion, (hyper)mediated spaces, and materiality”, published in the journal *Zeitschrift für Religion, Gesellschaft und Politik* (See: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s41682-021-00087-9>). In that article she offers theoretical reflections on the study of religion and the Internet by critically discussing the notion of “digital religion”, stressing the importance of integrating material and spatial approaches to this area of study of digital religion. She also goes on to propose the theory of “hypermediated religious spaces” to describe processes of religious mediation between online and offline environments by taking into account materiality and space.

This year’s annual essay provides a brief introduction to the theory of hypermediation and explains how it provides a useful lens to studying places and artifacts given attention in the global and interdisciplinary study of digital religion.

Digital religion exists at the intersection between online and offline practices, narratives and interactions. Indeed, scholars in digital religion studies put a lot of importance in exploring the blending between online and offline spheres, as it is explained in Campbell and Tsuria’s recent work on the topic (2021). This is the starting point of my theoretical reflections, and the framework I apply to the empirical case studies I analyze. Hence, what I hope my research can do in terms of contributions to the field, is to offer some insights that can help bridge the online and the offline both from a theoretical and a methodological perspective. To do so, I would like to stress the importance of space and materiality, two key terms that are not new in religious studies and sociology of religion, and that can be applied also to specific case studies when it comes to digital religion. I will go a little bit more in-depth with both of those terms.

Materiality is extremely important in the study of religion in general, especially since the material turn that happened in the last decades within religious studies. This approach looks at how material objects, the senses, and sensations –and not only abstract ideas and concepts –are helpful to understand how people experience religion (Hutchings & McKenzie, 2016). Similarly, the study of space has been used to understand how people create specific venues for religious practice, and how urban environments are organized to accommodate various religions (Knott, 2008). I think that materiality and space are also helpful when talking about digital religion: the Internet, indeed, is not an “immaterial” or “spaceless” place, but rather it can embed material sensations and create spaces of dialogue and practice. Examples of this are Neo-Pagans who use material objects (such as candles) together with digital technology to create a virtual space where they can perform rituals. Furthermore, members of minorities (like second-generation Muslims in Europe) can use the Internet to discuss their feelings and organize actions that will happen offline, in physical and material spaces.

The concepts of materiality and space are central to the theory of hypermediation, a perspective I use in my work. Hypermediation, according to scholar Scolari (2015), comes from the theory of mediation, as elaborated by Martin-Barbero (1993). As a media theory, mediation has been used in various contexts (especially in South and North America), and looks at how people communicate through a medium and create meaning in communication. In the work of Scolari, hypermediation is a type of mediation that considers the peculiarities of new media technologies, including the speed of contemporary communication and the possibilities of widely circulating certain content. In my opinion, hypermediation can also be applied to case studies of digital religion to better understand the connections between online and offline venues.

Instead of just talking about hypermediation, I often use the term hypermediated spaces to emphasize how people can create online venues that hold religious meanings, or spaces where they can discuss and articulate their religious identities (Evolvi, 2018). The prefix -hyper comes from Ancient Greek and, in this case, means something that is accentuated and enhanced. So, when I talk about hypermediated spaces, I talk about mediations that happen through multiple platforms and multiple venues. Additionally, I think about spaces that embed materiality and space in novel ways, creating hybrid venues for identity, authority, and community formation. When I talk about “venues” or “spaces,” I am not only thinking about media venues (such as different media platforms), but also offline venues, which continue to be the ultimate reference when talking about digital religion. Furthermore, I also pay respect to other theoretical perspectives which focus on media institutions, such as mediatization (Couldry & Hepp, 2013).

I believe that the theory of hypermediated spaces has several strengths. First of all, using the theory of hypermediation compels scholars to think about methodologies to discuss cases of digital religion: often, online actions exist on different social media simultaneously, but they also comment or seek the attention of the so-called “mainstream” media, and they have connections with communities and institutions operating offline. Therefore, studying a single platform or a single social network might not be enough, and it is necessary to explore the connections between various online actions. For example, it is important to analyze the same

discourses existing on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok - but also how they are reported in national newspapers and television, and how they are framed in everyday, offline spaces. Hypermediation, looking at the intensification of contemporary communication, can provide a framework to capture the complexity of narratives existing across platforms and media spaces.

Second, another strength of the theory of hypermediation, is that it encompasses a flexible definition of religion, including also non-institutional forms of religion. Therefore, it helps capture certain aspects that exist between the private and public manifestation of religion. For example, the Internet hosts pages of several religious institutions, such as the Vatican, but also the private opinions of individual believers who can be more or less aligned with authorities, or of groups who are not religious but use religious narratives. Therefore, the theory of hypermediation looks not only at “mainstream” manifestations, but also at alternative forms of religion, and at minority groups who may use the Internet because they see themselves at the margins of organized religions.

Third, the theory of hypermediation compels scholars to explore media avoidance, together with media use. As the work of Campbell (2007) shows, there are religious groups that negotiate the use of new technologies against their traditions and ideologies. This means that some groups may decide to avoid using media, or only use certain features and platforms. However, with the COVID-19 pandemic, it was almost impossible for many religious communities to avoid media, and especially the use of the internet, as they needed it as a replacement of physical interactions. The theory of hypermediated spaces, by putting emphasis also on the negotiation of authorities and communities, highlights some of the complexity of Internet communication. In particular, now that the pandemic is hopefully coming to an end, scholars will need theoretical frameworks to account for the changes brought by COVID-19, and assess whether religious communities need to continue using digital technology if they want to stay relevant for their believers.

Of course, there are also weaknesses in the theory of hypermediated spaces. It is still in development, so it does not necessarily capture all examples of digital religion. The theory may indeed be more apt for those case studies that are either connected to current events (a terrorist attack, a news item...), or to analyze specific online rituals, online conversations, online groups. Besides, it focuses on contexts with a high level of Internet use and media saturation, such as Europe and North America. Therefore, there may be a need for a theory that can account for the transnational developments of religion, including religion in places where the use of digital technologies is somehow limited. This means paying close attention to both the global and the local ramifications of digital religious practices and contexts.

In the future, the theory of hypermediation can benefit from further reflections on the terminology used to discuss digital religion. As many other scholars do, I employ the terms “online” and “offline” as a way to separate certain sets of actions and relationships. While I find these terms useful to explain how actions and narratives are connected to digital technology, using the “online” and “offline” distinction continues to maintain a dichotomy between what happens in digital spaces and what happens in physical spaces. In this respect, philosopher

Floridi (2015) proposes the term “onlife” to discuss the overlap created by these spaces. Onlife refers to the idea that there is a space between the online and offline dimensions. It is a concept that signals how much people are continuously connected to digital technology: for example, smartphones are used for spiritual practices and to gain knowledge about religion, but they are also fundamental devices employed several hours a day for interpersonal relations, work, and entertainment.

By employing a theoretical approach that focuses on the “onlife” aspects of digital media practices, or finding an alternative terminology that goes beyond the “online/offline” dichotomy, scholars of digital religion might better describe how both religion and digital media are intrinsic parts of everyday life. The search for new terminology should, in my opinion, go together with a re-thinking of some boundaries. In particular, it is important to consider a theory that blurs the boundaries between online and offline actions, but also between religion and other aspects of society and life. Several online discourses –for instance, the online narratives of politicians during electoral campaigns – employ religion to debate and validate a variety of topics. Hence, it is possible to see that religion is no longer a prerogative of religious institutions and authorities, but rather it enters other domains, being used to discuss gender, sexuality, migration, education, just to mention some examples. Therefore, I believe that scholars should think about the commonalities of different actions occurring in different spaces, the blending of the online and the offline sphere, and of what is religious and what is non-religious.

Therefore, by emphasizing space and materiality and the intensification of modern communication across different platforms, the theory of hypermediation can help scholars analyze some instances of digital religion. Overall, my work seeks to place more theoretical attention on the material and spatial aspects of digital religion. The theory of hypermediated spaces helps to talk about and understand connections between digital devices, platforms, and religious communities and individuals. I believe that this approach can give some new insights into the complexity and developments of contemporary examples in digital religion.

References

- Campbell, H. (2007). *When Religion Meets New Media: Media, Religion and Culture* (1st ed.). Media, Religion and Culture.
- Campbell, H. A., & Tsuria, R. (Eds.). (2021). *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in Digital Media* (2nd edition). Routledge.
- Couldry, N., & Hepp, A. (2013). Conceptualizing Mediatization: Contexts, Traditions, Arguments. *Communication Theory*, 23(3), 191–202.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/comt.12019>
- Evolvi, G. (2018). *Blogging My Religion: Secular, Muslim, and Catholic Media Spaces in Europe* (1 edition). Routledge.
- Floridi, L. (Ed.). (2015). *The Onlife Manifesto: Being Human in a Hyperconnected Era*. Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-04093-6>
- Hutchings, T., & McKenzie, J. (2016). *Materiality and the Study of Religion: The Stuff of the Sacred*. *Theology and Religion in Interdisciplinary Perspective Series in Association With the Bsa Sociology of Religion Study Group*.
- Knott, K. (2008). Spatial Theory and the Study of Religion. *Religion Compass*, 2(6), 1102–1116.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8171.2008.00112.x>
- Martin-Barbero, J. (1993). *Communication, Culture and Hegemony: From the Media to Mediations*. SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Scolari, C. A. (2015). From (new)media to (hyper)mediations. Recovering Jesús Martín-Barbero's mediation theory in the age of digital communication and cultural convergence. *Information, Communication & Society*, 18(9), 1092–1107.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2015.1018299>

Top 10 articles in Digital Religion Research for 2022

Each yearbook will feature a list of top scholarly articles published that year in Digital Religion studies. These articles are selected on the basis of recommendations received from the NMRDC advisory board as well as select scholars. They represent some of the best and most innovative work in the field. Please note these articles are presented according to alphabetical sorting of authors' last names, rather than in a numerical order.

Ikhwan, S., & Wafi, M. H. (2021). *Internet and religious identity construction: Jurus Sehat Rasulullah (JSR) da'i (preacher) Zaidul Akbar*. Jurnal Dakwah Risalah. Retrieved August 29, 2022, from <http://ejournal.uin-suska.ac.id/index.php/risalah/article/view/15711>

The presence of the internet has influenced the way people interact with their social environment, including in the context of religion. The Internet seems to eliminate boundaries, space and time in social interactions. This led to a fundamental change in how a person's identity was formed. This study discusses how online interactions can shape one's religious identity. "Jurus Sehat Rasulullah" as a da'wah theme which encourages Muslims to maintain their health and perform Islamic medicine is analyzed textually. This qualitative research in collecting data using online observation by observing JSR and its users. The search was focused on the Instagram account @ZaidulAkbar. The results showed that there was a religious identity construction process through the exchange of symbols among internet users who followed the official account of "Jurus Sehat Rasulullah."

Isetti, G. (2022, March 26). "Online You Will Never Get the Same Experience, Never": Minority Perspectives on (Digital) Religious Practice and Embodiment During the COVID-19 Outbreak. MDPI. Retrieved August 29, 2022, from <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/13/4/286>

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, religious services worldwide were forced to migrate online. This phenomenon is still yet to be properly investigated, especially in the context of religious and ethnic minorities: a research gap that this paper aims to address. Herein, 18 semi-structured in-depth interviews with members of the Russian community in South Tyrol served as methodological tool to explore: (1) the role of the Orthodox religion and (2) of digital media for the community and, finally, (3) how its members enacted religion during the COVID-19 pandemic. Empirical results show how community members, despite being highly familiar with digital tools and technology-based solutions, deliberately chose not to use digital media to search for religious content or to attend religious services. Against the backdrop of a global pandemic and an increasingly digitized world, the specific example of the Russian community in South Tyrol helps to better understand how migrant communities live and enact religion. The present study aims at contributing to the emerging field of the study of (digital) religion and embodiment of religion from a minority perspective.

Lang, N. (2022). *For a 'beautiful' religion without 'buzz': Hinduism, Facebook, gender, and status in La Reunion*. Taylor & Francis. Retrieved August 29, 2022, from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13537903.2021.2016989>

The ways in which some Hindu women use Facebook in the French overseas department of La Reunion suggest an intrinsic relationship between religion and media, not only in the sense of religious mediation, but also as mediation between their aspirations and achievements in terms of religious knowledge, gender roles, and social status. While their Facebook interactions need to be considered in continuation with their offline aspirations, the young women reported in this article use Facebook to create an alternative space to claim positions of authority. In contrast to the temple context and its strictly gendered access and tasks, they can, to a certain extent, bypass notions of ritual (im)purity and male domination on Facebook and take important roles in the selected dissemination and display of religious knowledge.

Latzer, M. (2022, May 5). *The Digital Trinity-controllable human evolution-implicit everyday religion - KZFSS Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*. SpringerLink. Retrieved August 29, 2022, from <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11577-022-00841-8>

How can the ubiquitous digitalization in the early twenty-first century be grasped and characterized? A media-change perspective that focuses on innovation-driven, complex co-evolutionary processes distinguishes two phases of digitalization and points to the following characteristics of its second phase: digitalization is an intertwined bundle of socio-technological transformation processes that reveals itself as a trinity of datafication, algorithmization and platformization. On the industry and politics side, this co-evolutionary trinity is driven by the belief in a scientifically and technologically controllable human evolution, reflected in the pursuit of nano-bio-info-cogno convergence, and accordingly linked to a transhumanism standing for this belief. On the users' side, the digital trinity is characterized and driven by the convergence of digital technology and religion in the form of an implicit everyday religion. These hallmarks of digitalization lead to a digitally transformed social order, shaped by the interplay of governance *by* and *of* this digital trinity, and challenged by growing complexity.

Quilty, E. (2022). *#Witchlife: Witchy digital spaces*. Taylor & Francis. Retrieved August 29, 2022, from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13537903.2021.2018801>

What does it mean to live a #witchlife? This article attempts to answer this question by exploring the social media habits and practices of young women who identify as witches. Based on an ethnographic study conducted in Australia, this article presents insights drawn from interviews and participant observation which I conducted. Throughout this article I argue that social media platforms are important spaces where witches create their social identities. A key component of this identity work is the playful and critical ways these young witches contest normative gendered scripts and re-imagine new narratives for themselves. This article identifies and analyzes a selection of these scripts and links them to broader patterns in

witchcraft communities to 're-weave' dis-empowering narratives, spinning them into new and more elaborate tapestries.

Shamionov, R. M., Мунирович, Ш. Р., Suzdaltsev, N. V., & Валерьевич, С. Н. (2022). *The ratio commitment to social activity on the internet and physical space among young people*. RUDN Journal of Psychology and Pedagogics. Retrieved August 29, 2022, from <https://journals.rudn.ru/psychology-pedagogics/article/view/30738>

Due to large-scale shifts in the development of digital technologies, with the expansion of opportunities and the spread of the Internet environment, activity is increasingly being moved from the physical environment to the Internet environment. In this regard, one of the most important problems is to identify the correlation of activity in the two environments and its reflection in the social identity of young people. The purpose of this study is to analyze the ratio of personal commitment to social activity in the Internet and physical space, taking into account its forms and the depth of ethnic, religious and civic identity. The study involved 199 people aged 17-24 years ($M = 20.02$; $SD = 2.7$). Commitment to various forms of social activity in the physical and Internet environment was assessed using scales developed and modified by the authors. Identification with the institution of religion was revealed with the help of specially designed questions about belonging to a confession and the degree of religiosity. Civic identity was determined according to the scale developed by A.N. Tatarko. The certainty of ethnic identity was estimated using the scales by A.N. Tatarko and N.M. Lebedeva. Descriptive statistics methods, correlation and regression analyzes were used for data processing. It was found that commitment to civil, political or friendly activities does not depend on their involvement in a real or virtual environment. Leisure activities are mostly represented in the virtual environment. The certainty and positivity of ethnic identity are associated with prosocial and more acceptable forms of activity for young people, but its uncertainty is associated with protest forms of activity in both environments; civic identity is associated with the most preferred leisure activity in both environments, with volunteer activity and reduced protest activity in the real environment, political activity on the Internet and preference for activity in the Internet space; commitment to religion is associated with corresponding activity and conflicts with the protest, environmental and network ones, which mainly characterize leisure time. Activity in the physical environment is a stronger predictor of civic, ethnic and religious identity than in the Internet environment.

Stańdo, J., Piechnik-Czyż, G., Adamski, A., & Fechner, Ż. (2022, July 15). *The COVID-19 pandemic and the interest in prayer and spirituality in Poland according to Google Trends data in the context of the mediatization of religion processes*. MDPI. Retrieved August 29, 2022, from <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/13/7/655>

The research undertaken in this article uses the Google Trends tool to study the degree of interest in prayer and general spirituality during the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland and Europe. The authors assumed that for people interested in prayer during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Internet served as a virtual prayer book. The main research questions addressed the frequency of typed queries, referring not only to the word "prayer" but also to

specific types of prayer. In addition, interest in prayer was compared with interest in the word “prophecy” to explore the relationship between religiosity and interest in the supernatural sphere in its broadest sense. The analysis shows that there is distinct recurrence regarding the terms searched, with some of them noticeably intensifying with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings also show that keywords related to prophecies were searched more frequently at significant moments in Polish history (2005—the death of John Paul II, 2010—the plane crash in which the President of Poland died) than in the months of 2020 when the pandemic struck and escalated. At that time, searches related to religion were more frequent. It can also be concluded that the outbreak of the pandemic contributed to an increase in the religious activity of Poles. The article is interdisciplinary in nature, referring primarily to Religion Studies and Mass Media and Communication Studies.

Starkey, Caroline, Emma Tomalin, and Anna Halafoff. (2022). *Women, religion, and digital counter-publics: introduction*. Journal of Contemporary Religion 37.1. Retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13537903.2022.2030122>

Even after decades of critical scholarship on religion and the Internet, a rapidly changing field and a febrile global political climate demand renewed questions about the relationships between online spaces and gender-related activism. This is particularly the case, in the post-#MeToo era, in relation to women and religion. While digital activism both promotes and challenges gender inequalities, reflecting prejudices apparent in the offline world, women and men continue to create and adapt online spaces that question received wisdom about their roles in religious traditions. We argue that using Nancy Fraser’s concept of the ‘subaltern counter-public’, adapted by Marc Lamont-Hill as the ‘digital counter-public’, allows us to explore the extent to which digital spaces enable traditional religious authority structures to be challenged in ways that might not be possible in the offline environment. The aim of this Special Issue Section is to provide four detailed case study examples, drawn from Sikhism, Wicca, Hinduism, and Buddhism, across varied geographical and political contexts, in order to examine how women have engaged the digital to create spaces that challenge mainstream narratives about their religious attainment and belonging, raising key questions for the ongoing study of religion online.

Wilkins-Laflamme, S. (2021, July 2). *Digital Religion among U.S. and Canadian millennial adults - review of religious research*. SpringerLink. Retrieved August 29, 2022, from <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13644-021-00463-0>

Although there is a growing body of research on the nature and content of digital religion, we still know little about the prevalence of digital religious and spiritual practices among different populations in North America. To what extent do digital technologies play a complementary role to in-person religious and spiritual activities only, or do they also reach out to and provide important spaces for new segments of the population removed from more conventional forms of organized religion? The goal of this article is to answer this research question and to explore the prevalence of different types of digital religion practices specifically among young adult Millennials in both the U.S. and Canada. We find that (1) digital religion as measured in this

study is a phenomenon present among many Millennials, although it is also not present among all or a vast majority of this demographic; (2) this is especially the case for more passive forms of digital religion, notably digital content consumption, compared with more active forms such as social media posting; (3) social environment does play an important role, with digital religion practices much more prevalent in the generally more religious U.S. context, compared with the generally more secular Canadian context; and (4) digital religion practices are often, but not always, tied to other in-person religious and spiritual activities among Millennials. We argue that we should understand the individual spiritualization and secular transition frameworks as complementary, rather than in complete opposition, regarding the prevalence of digital religion among Millennials.

Zaid, B., Fedtke, J., Shin, D. D., El Kadoussi, A., & Ibahrine, M. (2022, April 8). *Digital Islam and Muslim millennials: How social media influencers reimagine religious authority and Islamic practices*. MDPI. Retrieved August 29, 2022, from <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/13/4/335>

Digital platforms have empowered individuals and communities to re-negotiate long-established notions of religion and authority. A new generation of social media influencers has recently emerged in the Muslim world. They are western-educated, unique storytellers, and savvy in digital media production. This raises new questions on the future of Islam in the context of emerging challenges, such as the openness of technology and the often-perceived closedness of religious and cultural systems within Muslim societies. This paper uses a multiple case research design to examine the roles of social media influencers in reimagining Islam and reshaping spiritual beliefs and religious practices among young people in the Gulf Region, the Arab world, and beyond. We used thematic analysis of the Instagram and YouTube content of four social media influencers in the Gulf Region: Salama Mohamed and Khalid Al Ameri from the United Arab Emirates, Ahmad Al-Shugairi from Saudi Arabia, and Omar Farooq from Bahrain. The study found that social media influencers are challenging traditional religious authorities as they reimagine Muslim identities based on a new global lifestyle.

Scholars to Watch

Each addition of the Digital Religion Yearbook features a list of scholars that are engaged in research projects that are likely to make a significant impact of the field by tackling understudied topics or approaching key questions within the field in novel ways. In this yearbook, scholars were selected by Heidi A Campbell & Pauline Hope Cheong, editors of the forthcoming, Oxford Handbook of Digital Religion. Individuals featured were selected from among the over 40 contributors to the Handbook. Scholars are presented in alphabetical order by last name, rather than in a numerical ranking.

Erika Gault

Associate Professor, University of Arizona
egault@arizona.edu

“The Digital Black Religion Project and the Connected Faith Survey”

Project Overview:

The Digital Black Religion Project, a first-of-its-kind web platform for digital humanities scholars and Black religious publics (e.g., leaders and practitioners of diverse faith traditions) interested in understanding the history and present intersecting contours of technology and Black religion. *Connected Faith* will consider the Pew Research Center’s and the Association of Religion Data Archives’ (ARDA) earlier approaches to studying Black religion and technology use among Black users in order to build a survey that specifically documents digital Black religious practices. A June 2023 workshop will gather digital Black religion scholars and practitioners of diverse traditions to evaluate the platform prototype, add essential resources to its pages, and be introduced to new digital tools for conducting their work in digital Black religion. *Connected Faith* will give the public an innovative way to explore the networks that have been foundational to the formation of modern Black religion.

“How do you see your current and previous work contributing to the field of Digital Religion Studies?”

My work, through its examination of Black lives and histories, offers Digital Religion Studies a broader framework. There remain too few works in this area in Digital Religion Studies. With the explosion of works within fields like Black Digital Studies it's important that religion scholars craft both a response and essential works on digital Black religion. I hope that my work signals to the field of Digital Religion Studies both the vitality and emergence of new voices writing at the intersections of religion, data, and intersectionality.

Margarita Guillory

Associate Professor, Boston University

mlsg@bu.edu

“Africana Religion in the Digital Age”

[Book to be published in Routledge Series in Religion and Digital Culture, editors: Gregory Price Grieve, Heidi A. Campbell, and Johanna Sumiala]"

Project Overview:

This book examines how practitioners of Africana religions have used and continue to use digital interactive media like the Internet, social media, mobile applications, and gaming to articulate multidimensional forms of self. *Africana Religion in the Digital Age* will be significant in its expansion of both the field of Africana religion and digital religion. In the case of Africana religion, while Christianity is a continuous marker of religious identity for many African Americans, this digital approach in examining Africana religion as practiced in the US uncovers other non-Christian traditions that have been marginalized in the field as a whole. Also, this book will contribute to the field of Digital Religion Studies, particularly along the lines of *identity* and *authority*. It explores how social media, mobile applications, and gaming are used by practitioners of Africana religions to express various modes of online self-representations, adding to the existing literature in digital religion that focuses on intersections between religion, identity, and digital media. Furthermore, this work demonstrates the variety of ways that Africana religious practitioners employ digital platforms to both complement and disrupt religious authority. In this manner, *Africana Religion in the Digital Age* grapples with the paradoxical relationship between digital mediation and religious authority: a move that further extends Digital Religion Studies scholarship.

“How do you see your current and previous work contributing to the field of Digital Religion Studies?”

1. My work further diversifies “canonical” religious traditions that have traditionally taken center stage in Digital Religion Studies. To date, Africana religions have been underrepresented in the field. Thus, my work will provide this representation, while also demonstrating how the implementation of these religious traditions provides an even more nuanced conceptualization of the reciprocal engagement between religion and emerging digital technologies.
2. Identity studies is central to both my past and current work. Currently, my work considers how Africana religious practitioners engage digital interactive media to express multidimensional modes of online and offline identities. Scholarship of this kind will complicate and complement the existing literature on identity studies in Digital Religion Studies.

Bala A. Musa, Ph.D.

Professor of Communication Studies & Honors Faculty Fellow, Azusa Pacific University

bmusa@apu.edu

“Digital Religion and Online Community in Times of Crisis”

Project Overview:

My colleagues and I are researching the role of digital religion and online faith communities in crisis response, management, and restoration. The global community has been in the throes of many crises, from the Covid-19 pandemic, to environmental crises, refugee crises, political tensions, and major internal and international conflicts. Our research looks at how digital religion and online faith communities impact the way individuals and groups navigate personal and communal crises. The research examines the role online faith practices and communities play during times of health, political, economic, and social crises, instability, and uncertainty.

“How do you see your current and previous work contributing to the field of Digital Religion Studies?”

As a scholar-mentor, I value collaborative research. The opportunity to conduct individual and collaborative research on digital religion and my many other research interests is enlightening, motivating and enriching. Research enables me to engage in dialogue with others on subjects of inquiry. I hope my recent scholarships on digital religion, which includes journal articles published in *Howard Journal of Communications*, *Journal of Christian Teaching and Practice in Communication Studies*, and *Fuller Studio*, as well as chapters in the *Ecclesiology for a Digital Church* series and the forthcoming *Oxford Handbook of Digital Religion*, among others. I have also granted podcast interviews to different outlets on my research. It is expected that these works and my future research will illuminate the theory and practice of digital religion from national and transnational perspectives.

Teemu Taira

Senior Lecturer, University of Helsinki

teetai@utu.fi

“Atheism in news media, social media and media culture”

Project Overview:

In my current project I examine how atheism and atheists are conceived, conceptualized and portrayed in media. As such studies have been rare, I aim to cover different types of media from factual news media to social media to popular culture. Although media outlets and spaces are different in many ways, I hypothesize that generally atheism and atheists are represented in a somewhat negative manner. If so, the study provides grounds for nuancing some stereotypes about “atheistic media” and “atheistic media professionals” and a way to ask perhaps more interesting question of what implications such representations have for thinking about the theories concerning religion, atheism and media (e.g. mediatization of religion and the role of

media in religious change). In addition to contributing to existing scholarly debates, my hope is that mapping the discourses and representations of atheism in different types of media inspires others to develop projects that pay attention to discourses on atheism or at least think about their potential relevance for the key theories and approaches in the field of media, religion and culture, including digital religion studies.

“How do you see your current and previous work contributing to the field of Digital Religion Studies?”

A large part of my research has focused on studying media discourses on atheism and religion. One of the ways in which my current work contributes to digital religion studies relates to examining both media representations of atheism and the relevance of digital media environments for atheistic groups, ideas and discourses. Atheism as a topic has not been highlighted in the field, but scholars interested in digital religion should also think how atheism (as the “other” of religion for many) thrives in digital spaces, especially outside the often rather negative representations of mainstream news media. This helps us theorize the role of digitalization in religious change. Moreover, the debate on mediatization of religion would benefit from rethinking its key arguments by focusing on atheism. Finally, as a scholar who has spent a lot of time studying portrayals of religion and atheism in traditional media outlets, such as newspapers, I also happen to think that it is relevant to consider the interaction between social media and news production of large media corporations, because they “feed” and comment each other, and they both contribute significantly to the discourses on religion and atheism in society more generally – and discourses affect our attitudes, values and behavior.

Xenia Zeiler

Professor, University of Helsinki

xenia.zeiler@helsinki.fi

“Digital Hinduism and Video Games”

Project Overview:

The scholarship in digital Hinduism is constantly expanding, and this includes paying increased attention to novel digital media genres and platforms. My ongoing research on Hindu traditions and video games explores novel developments in one of the latest digital genres studied in relation to Hinduism. Themes related to Hinduism are included in games produced worldwide; for example, deities based on Hindu mythology (such as the goddess Kali in the game SMITE, Hi-Rez Studios 2014) or themes related to Hindu belief (such as karma in the game Asura’s Wrath, CyberConnect2, 2012) have been incorporated in video games produced and released for a long time. At times, this has led to heated public debates. Additionally, we can see a new trend of including Hindu themes in a broad sense in video games produced in India for the past five to ten years. With the ongoing expansion and diversification of the Indian video game development landscapes since about 2015, we now see a wave of new games that make extensive use of Indian cultural heritage, including religious references as well as heritage artistic features in a broader sense, such as music, dance, architecture, or dress styles.

“How do you see your current and previous work contributing to the field of Digital Religion Studies?”

Digital Religion, as a field of inquiry and academic discipline, has been around for more than twenty years now. Not surprisingly, and especially due to the growing acceptance and intensifying interest in the study of religion and digital media, the field has diversified over time. This is true for the overall research themes as well as regarding precise research questions, applied methods, and theoretical frames. Nevertheless, the expanding and diversifying scope and shape of studies on digital religion do not yet extend to all religious traditions and world regions in the same way. That is, there is a continuing need to expand analyses to include more so-far underrepresented religious traditions and geographical regions. Since about 2015, we have increasingly seen scholars responding to this deficiency with new publications, including comprehensive works on, e.g., digital Buddhism (e.g., Grieve 2016; Grieve and Veidlinger 2015), digital Judaism (e.g., Campbell 2015), digital Islam (e.g., Muhanna 2016) and finally, digital Hinduism (Zeiler 2020). In this sense, I understand my work as contributing new data that further novel methodical and theoretical discussions and developments for digital religion research overall.

TOP STUDENT THESIS AND DISSERTATION IN DIGITAL RELIGION STUDIES FOR 2022

In each edition of the yearbook the NMRDC research team will select and spotlight outstanding student theses or Dissertations completed in the past year in Digital Religion studies. This year we draw attention to a PhD dissertation on Digital Buddhism and changing notions of religion.

Graduate Dissertation

Seth M. Walker

PhD in Religion, University of Denver

Independent Scholar

smwalker@fastmail.com

<https://sethmwalker.com/>

Walker, Seth M. *Righteous Remixes, Sacred Mashups: Rethinking Authority, Authenticity, and Originality in the Study of Religion*. (2021). Electronic Theses and Dissertations. 2020. Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/etd/2020>

Abstract

This dissertation sets out to place emergent theories of “remix” in conversation with scholarship exploring changes in the definitions and practices associated with the word “religion.” Through particular case studies, the dissertation analyzes the ways that certain contemporary creators, writers, and influencers have emerged as constructors of contemporary Buddhism. Specifically building upon the critiques of religion put forth by Jonathan Z. Smith, Russell T. McCutcheon, Brent Nongbri, Jane Iwamura, and others, I am concerned with how individuals who are not part of the religious studies scholarly community participate in the processes of constructing religion, and in this case, in constructing and contributing to changes in a specifically North American and European understanding of Buddhism. Utilizing an approach that centers on the art of metaphor, and employing a model for specifically studying cultural constructs via remix theory that I term Remix+/-, I explore the ways that a few influential leaders, including Stephen Batchelor, Osamu Tezuka, and Jon Kabat-Zinn, express and advocate for certain approaches to practices, rituals, and beliefs that are ostensibly related to historic forms of Buddhism. I argue that the ways they make their claims are best understood in relation to patterned metaphorical assumptions about religion. I further highlight the ways that these individuals are able to leverage technologies, rhetorics, and techniques in order to lay their claim – directly or indirectly – to authority, originality, and authenticity. Finally, I argue that these emergent leaders may be understood as exemplars not only of changes to Buddhism that are occurring today, but of what is likely to happen in the future with increasing speed. This speed and direction of change in “religion” is due to the affordances of digital technologies that intensify existing

relations of power and amplify the views of those positioned, as these leaders are, as those who can lay claim to certain linguistic, cultural, geographic, and technological resources as they participate in the construction of an emergent form of what they argue is Buddhism.

Key Research Findings:

One of the main things I discovered through my case studies is that remix theory can help better reveal certain features – e.g., the heterogeneity of context and history shaping beliefs and practices, and issues pertaining to privilege and power – that have been downplayed or excluded in the midst of taken-for-granted terminological and metaphorical processes among cultural traditions. By positioning “remix” in a metaphorical framework for studying the ways in which cultural processes and constructs are formed and sustained, I found that it can greatly assist in rethinking assumptions of originality and authority by displacing some of the aura of authenticity attached to various traditions, and the supposed static nature of a tradition against which new movements and developments might be compared or contrasted. Remix+/- has helped me see that the speed of change and the construction of religiosity in the contemporary era cannot be separated from the changes in technology the world has also seen, and the increased digital literacy within Western contexts that coincides with this.

Primary contribution to the field of Digital Religion Studies

Religious beliefs, practices, and developments have been increasingly analyzed in the context of digital culture, but the specific lens and conceptual framework Remix+/- provides has been missing from previous work in religious studies. The emergence of “remix” as a conceptual metaphor is directly connected to the networked dimensions of contemporary culture, its digital-age configurability, and the engagement and access to its media that no longer necessitates a designated class of creators. When religiosity is more explicitly conceived as being comprised of mediated processes revolving around data selection and the recombination of legitimated source material, it reasserts its own status as culturally constructed, dialogically composed, and constantly changing. This sort of repositioning and perspective was demonstrated through an examination of the ways that contemporary Western Buddhist leaders have been able to utilize the affordances of digital media to leverage their positionality and media celebrity. The combinations of digital affordances, positionality, and media celebrity have allowed them to engage in the processes of addition and subtraction modeled by Remix+/- as they make claims that their views are authoritative, authentic, and original approaches to Buddhism.

Publications by the Network for New Media, Religion and Digital Culture Studies in 2022

Finally, each yearbook will highlight key works produced by the NMRDC director and members of the research team, to showcase the ways in which they seek to exemplify the continuing advancement and promotions of Digital Religion Studies into new areas.

Campbell, Heidi A. and Dyer, J. (2022). *Ecclesiology for a Digital Church*, London: SCM Press.

What are the ecclesiological challenges and opportunities raised by technology? How have developments related to the COVID-19 global health crisis impacted churches, forcing a swift move to mediated and online worship? And how will this change the shape of churches' theological and programmatic choices for years to come? Drawing together a diverse group of theologians and media scholars, this volume considers the key theological question churches and religious leaders need to engage with as they look towards long term strategies involving church life and technology.

Campbell, H. A. (2022). *Understandings of the church as revealed in quarantine: Reimagining the people of God. Ecclesiology for a digital church: Theological reflections on a new normal*, 59-73.

In this chapter, Heidi Campbell draws on nearly 25 years of studying the formation of online communities and the ways they tend to understand themselves and other communities. She compares the New Testament metaphor of the 'Body of Christ' with the Old Testament concept of the 'People of God,'" suggesting that while the former is more common in many contemporary churches, the latter offers a clearer and more robust understanding of how the church could and should function in a digitally networked world.

From the Tech in Churches During Covid-19 Project:

Campbell, Heidi A. and Jones, G. (2022). "When the Church Embraced a Posthuman Future: How Pastoral Negotiations with Technology During the Covid-19 Pandemic Resulted in an Implicit Acceptance of Posthumanism", (pp. 201-216), in *Postdigital Theologies Technology, Belief, and Practice*, edited by J.Reader and M. Savin-Baden, Springer. Retrieved from https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-031-09405-7_12

Our chapter draws on evidence from a research study exploring pastors' views of technology during the global Covid-19 pandemic. It explores the ways leaders framed their engagement with technology, which points towards larger shifts occurring within contemporary culture about popular views and language concerning technology. These discursive moves surfaced through investigating how church leaders talked about digital media as they transitioned from offline to online modes of worship services during the pandemic. We suggest that some common perceptions of digital media identified may point towards religious groups beginning to, or inadvertently accepting core, or grounding premises of a posthuman future, as discussed in the work of David Roden.

Campbell, Heidi A. and Jordan, Mandy (2022). *The Digital Divide, Digital Reluctance and Its Impact on Pandemic Churches*. Retrieved from <https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/handle/1969.1/195938>

This paper explores how churches encountered and responded to challenges related to the Digital Divide, which was present within many churches but unnoticed prior to the pandemic.

Campbell, Heidi A. and Osteen, Sophia (2022). *Embracing Pastoral Entrepreneurship during the Pandemic: Traits needed to be an Effective Digital Pastor*. Retrieved from <https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/handle/1969.1/195453>

This paper identifies and discusses five key traits pastors found essential to moving their services online, and reflects on how the pandemic required many pastors to step into a unique role as entrepreneurs.