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Paradigms of the Religious Network Society

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Abstract

Beginning in the early 1970's with the invention of the microprocessor, mass use of information technologies worldwide coincided with the appearance of a nodally-linked network of digital interconnectivity, or 'network society' (Castells, 1996). The network society's exponential growth correlates with a rise in use of digital networking media by various sects and denominations of the Christian religion. Today, growing numbers of Christian organizations integrate digital media into both their approach to worship and the dissemination of the Holy Scriptures. This paper argues that the use of digital media by these organizations is indicative of the creation of a "religious network society" exhibiting identical structural paradigms to Castells' (1996) network society. By virtue of the media deployed within it, the 'religious network society' fosters a mass culture of digital participation characterized by a rapid fragmentation of religious messaging and an over-sharing of personal religious beliefs. However, the religious network society also erodes Christianity's hierarchical structures of authority (Turner, 2007). It is argued that these structures are being replaced with a banal form of religion emphasizing spirituality and individual self-expression at the expense of tradition (Campbell, 2012; Hjarvard, 2013). Moreover, purpose alterations to Christianity's authority structures and approach to worship are indicative of a much larger shift in the religion, in which rising digital media use may in fact imply a decline in Christianity's societal influence.

Keywords
Network society, digital media, Christianity, religious participation

Introduction

For centuries, Christianity has placed considerable emphasis on the privacy of worship. Indeed, the religion was predicated on the assumption that one's relationship with God is uniquely personal. Yet in a forced bid to stay relevant in a secular, media-centric age, many Christian organizations are adopting highly public digital networking media in their approach to worship and dissemination of the Scriptures (Campbell, 2011). It is my contention that the addition of digital media into Christian worship is indicative of a purposive structural evolution to the religion, one which is characterized by increased autonomy for the individual worshipper in addition to an erosion of sacred historical notions of the private religious self (Allen, 2011; Campbell, 2012; Castells, 2007; Hjarvard, 2013). This structural evolution occurs as growing numbers of Christians choose not to worship in isolation but in very public autonomous groups characterized by their reliance on networked digital media (Campbell & La Pastina, 2010; Campbell, 2012).

These 'digitally religious groups'[i], as I label them, due to their online networking component, exist outside of traditional Roman Catholic hierarchies and exhibit similar structural paradigms to Manuel Castells' (1996) *network society.* When applied to modern Christianity, these paradigms are indicative of the creation of a faith-based *religious network society* in which, ironically, secular media shapes and influences the religion through the practice of digital worship (Campbell, 2011, p. 64; Hjarvard, 2013; Thompson, 2007).

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The Network Society and Religious Network Paradigms

Manuel Castells (1996) theorized that the microprocessor fuelled worldwide diffusion of information technologies led to the emergence of a "new technological system" of interconnectedness or *network society* (p. 59). Following the rise of the network society, a number of identifiable paradigms emerged, each of which dictates the network's logic and growth. Citing Santa Fe Institute researcher Duncan Watts, Castells (1996) outlines the further convergence of information technologies into highly integrated digital sub-systems, effectively creating a number of "*small worlds*" (p. 74). These networked small worlds are best exemplified in personal computing devices such as the iPad or iPhone which when 'plugged in' to the World Wide Web, are nodally linked to the network society at large through their online connectivity.

Given the tendency of the network society to experience exponential growth, structural control is needed to ensure network stability, typically achieved by controlling the flow of information (data) input into the network (Castells, 1996). Regarding Christianity's growing practice of digital worship worldwide, control of the religious network society is achieved when pastors of individual churches, frequently non-denominational, make informed decisions as to the type of media allowed in sermons and the manner in which worshippers may utilize them, thus providing a form of network stability (Campbell, 2012).

Due to the flexibility afforded by these online 'small worlds', the modern Christian is now able to attend sermons in proxy via the internet where they are free to espouse their personal religious beliefs with others through a variety of digital platforms such as online message boards, video conferencing, text messaging and peer to peer scripture dissemination (Christians, 2002; Phillips, 2012; Thompson, 2007; Torma & Teusner, 2011). Worship for many modern Christians then, rather than occurring through traditional forms of in-person communion, frequently takes place in a digital environment that sacrifices depth for breadth via the rapid transmission of the Holy Scriptures in digital form (Baesler & Chen, 2013; Phillips, 2012). This echoes well documented secular problems with memory retention and depth of understanding as a result of digitally-aided learning.

Digital worship, by virtue of its online networking component, also indicates the existence of *timeless time* and a *space of flows* (Castells, 1996). Timeless time in the network society refers to a negation of the linear sequence of time; thus a traditional, set-piece mass at a predetermined time need not occur as worshippers can 'plug in' to the religious network society from any time zone and participate as asynchronous, independent social actors (Castells, 2007). A space of flows, concurrently, occurs when a network interaction takes place without the constraints of physical space, thus producing a "culture of real virtuality" in which the participant in a digital sermon creates their own culture of meaning rather than an external, physical force creating it for them (Castells, 2000, p. 21).

The structural paradigms of the religious network society and its culture of digital participation are further exhibited in several distinct characteristics that are unique to Christianity (Crowley, 2013, p. 61). The first of these is the existence of low-barriers to civic engagement. While being a Christian is predicated on faith, worshippers become part of the religious network society simply by 'plugging in' to it, thereby creating an inclusive *virtual community* of interconnectedness (Rheingold, 1993).

The second characteristic of this culture of digital participation is that of strong group solidarity. Members of religious communities tend to be extremely supportive of one another and when this culture of support is applied to the religious network society, "strong incentives for creative [religious self] expression" occur (Crowley, 2013, p. 62). By 'plugging in', new members are actively encouraged to tweet, snap photos and share their love for God through a variety of social media platforms and devices. The result is a phenomenon of digital religious solidarity not seen in traditional, unmediated Christian communities.

The third characteristic of the religious network society's digital culture of participation is the mentorship which occurs between novice worshippers and more experienced network members. In more traditional religious organizations lacking digital media integration, sacred religious values are

transmitted to congregation members through the communal act of physical worship or 'Sunday service'. The religious network society however, accomplishes this through the "technological ideology" of the digital media within it (Campbell, 2012, p. 105). By ensuring that the foundational principles of Christianity are transmitted through a networked mentorship between experienced members and novices, hegemonic "hyper-textually linked and dispersed" practices of worship are the result (Campbell, 2012, p. 105). These often take the form of media-centric 'Life Groups' in which more senior congregation members lead newer members in digitally mediated prayer sessions often with the aid of a pre-recorded video.

The belief among members of religious networks that their contributions as social agents have relevance is the fourth characteristic of the religious network society's culture of digital participation. This is not to say however, that Christianity's historical contributions to the betterment of society lacked importance; rather that in the religious network society there exists a 'cultural commune' of interconnectivity not found with previous generations of worshippers (R. A. Campbell, 2000; Castells, 2000). And as Christianity's approach to worship is increasingly shaped by secular forces outside of it, the necessity for its worshippers to feel a sense of relevance in society becomes all the more important. Modern Christianity's culture of digital interconnectivity and mentorship thus places religious discourse into a context that is "shaped by forces [that are] extrinsic to it" (Soukup, 2004, p. 101).

Technologies Acting on Information

A second paradigm of the religious network society that of technologies acting on information. This is seen with Christianity's growing use of handheld digital media devices in sermons. For example, when iPhone first released to the public in 2007, it quickly became known in religious circles as the 'Jesus Phone' due to its immediate appearance in the hands of pastors who welcomed the device's ability to instantly call up passages of text from the scriptures at the touch of a button (Campbell & La Pastina, 2010). Further, the level of digital media integration by many Christian organizations[ii] is now so seamless that the modern Christian is able to "watch video recordings of sermons, read the bible in multiple translations in many languages, follow guided meditations and pray from written prayers" all on digital devices originally designed for secular use (Torma & Teusner, 2011, p. 137).

While the accessibility of Christian religious materials is vastly improved by the integration of digital media in sermons, integration becomes a potential danger when worshippers become subservient to their devices and cease to be cognizant of the fact that the goal of digital media integration in religious circles is to aid in worship rather than hinder it (Thompson, 2007). The implied necessity of the public sharing of personal values through online social networks is one such example of the subservience of individuals to digital media that presents a unique problem for the church: namely that of a "compulsory embrace" between religion and media (Allen, 2011; Cheong, 2011, p. 23). Specifically, this refers to a wide-ranging limitation of the network society, religious and otherwise, namely that of the participate or be left behind stewardship of digital media (Cheong, 2011). Simply put, if one is not plugged in to the network society and participating as a social actor within it then they are not a part of it at all. Similarly, digital worship practices in the religious network society often result in what Hjarvard (2013) labels *banal religion* or religion in which worshippers have only the *appearance* of interconnectivity and are in fact moving away from both each other and their relationship with God. As more and more worshippers plug in to the religious network society and access sacred materials online and through handheld digital devices, their collective religious imaginations are dampened through the isolation inherent to digital media and thus their relationship and experience with the guiding principles of religious institutions becomes limited.

Campbell (2011) states that digital religion is "shaped by the network structure and functionality of information communication technology" (p.65). This in turn fosters a unique state of religiosity in which the modern worshipper cannot easily be disembedded from the media which they ostensibly

use to bring them closer to each other and to God, again echoing Hjarvard (2013)'s notion of banal religion (Baesler & Chen, 2013). As a result, worshippers are often forced to walk a tightrope between institutional pressures of piety and the privacy of worship with more modern forms of worship that encourage an often pervasive participation with digital media, again a symptom of a banal religion characterized by an oversharing of personal religious beliefs (Allen, 2011).

While there is certainly a networking component to traditional forms of worship such as the prototypical 'Sunday Service', digital media affords the modern worshipper a level of interconnectedness and flexibility not seen in previous generations of Christian worshippers (Thompson, 2007). With physical bibles for example, worshippers cannot call up specific passages of text at the push of a button or share select passages with fellow worshippers through cyberspace, thus limiting the usefulness of physical texts in the religious network society. But by 'plugging in', the modern Christian becomes part of a greater nodal structure of religiosity, one in which religion and media are no longer separate modes of discourse but in fact a seamless entity (Stolow, 2005). The structure of the religious network society thus operates in a logical manner in that its growth is tied to the independent contributions of its members as social actors which are then absorbed into a unified digital structure which grows exponentially as a result.

Network Fragmentation and Disengagement

A final paradigm of the religious network society is exhibited in the flexibility of the technologies within it. Modern Christianity is increasingly becoming a faith-based, digital centric 'cyberchurch' (Campbell, 2011). A distinguishing characteristic of this cyberchurch is its ability for members to engage in worship and dissemination through a flexible nodal network without being bound by the constraints of time and physical space[iii]. Yet there are serious implications to this timeless time and space of flows that involve a fragmentation of the messages transmitted within it (Castells, 1996; Cheong, 2011; Phillips, 2012). As worshippers increasingly rely on digital devices to access the religious materials, a fragmentation of messaging can occur in which individual interpretations of religious text can differ from traditional church doctrine (Cheong, 2011). This mirrors an issue of historical significance in Christianity: the invention of the printing press. While Gutenberg's creation fostered widespread interest in the teachings of the Scriptures, it also led to a fragmentation of Church doctrine in which worshippers began to interpret the scriptures in their own unique manner, a process which heavily influenced the Protestant Reformation.

The flexibility afforded to Christian worshippers by digital media also results in a disengagement of form from content. This occurs when digital religious text is viewed as being "undifferentiated" from its traditional printed brethren (Phillips, 2012, p. 43). For example, the smartphone app 'Bible Gateway' makes multiple translations of the text instantly available at the touch of a button. However, this in effect sidesteps the text's intrinsic value as the sacred printed word of God; fostering the perception that the perceived value or 'essence' of the text exists extrinsically from its form (Phillips, 2012).

Limitations of Networked Religion

The flexibility and ease of access of the religious network society is not without its limitations. Network logic dictates that as a network expands, previous concentrations of power are dissolved (Van Dijk, 1999, p. 130). Regarding Christianity's growing practice of digital worship, the shift in focus from the real to the virtual (digital) has overtaken the moderated dissemination of information within it, thereby sacrificing depth for breadth. Put simply, the religion's digital footprint has grown so rapidly that it is has become increasingly difficult for the mediated exchange of data within the religious network society to be monitored, again echoing historical issues of information control seen with the printing press.

The second limitation of the religious network society is found in the vague notion of the digital religious self. A contradiction exists in Christianity's culture of digital participation in that while worshippers are encouraged to attend sermons physically, in person, the notion of the self is negated when plugged in to a digital network such as Second Life[iv] as one's digital presence exists independent of any physical form. Thus as the need for a physical body to worship God and disseminate the scriptures declines, so too does the need for a hierarchical power structure and chain of command (Turner, 2007).

Conclusion

As the network society continues to experience exponential growth through the media utilized within it, so too does the religious network society. Technological innovation, the catalyst for mass use of digital media in all its forms, is the driving force behind this growth and as society moves forward in an increasingly media centric manner, religious organizations follow suit out of necessity. Christianity's instrumentalist approach to modern practices of worship have thus become a self-fulfilling prophecy, one in which the meaning of the technology utilized by the religion is found in the necessary purpose that it serves (Christians, 2002). Yet the perceived benefits of digital religion are increasingly falling under scrutiny in religious circles by more fundamental Christian sects and denominations due to its ultra-modern approach (Allen, 2011). Not only are historical notions of religious privacy drastically altered through digital media integration, but the religious self is affected as well as it becomes increasingly disembodied and fragmented in digital form. Similarly, accurate dissemination of the Holy Scriptures is also at a risk of misinterpretation due to a lack of religious authority in the online realm (Turner, 2007).

The religious network society can thus be characterized by not only the production and consumption of information but also, more importantly, power relations: "historically, power [in the network society] was imbedded in organizations and institutions, organized around a hierarchy of centres" (Castells, 2000, p. 19). Yet societies evolve by deconstructing these hierarchies through pressure from new social groups (Castells, 2007) For the modern Christian, this may imply that the religion's traditional sphere of influence is no longer the dominant societal force that it once was. It has been shown that since 1990, some 25 million individuals in America alone report having no religious affiliation whatsoever, a significant decrease from previous generations that can be attributed to mass use of the internet ("How the Internet Is Taking Away America's Religion," 2014).

Christianity today exists very much as a de-centralized, multi-nodal organization, one which turned to digital media out of necessity in order for its messaging to be spread and received in an increasingly secular world. But at what cost? The challenges faced by Christianity to stay relevant in this secular world are, as I have demonstrated, being met by a long standing collective will to move forward in a highly technological manner, one which is predicated on a perceived decline of the religion brought forth through practices of modernization (Stolow, 2005, p. 122). For Castells (2000), "churches have to enter the new media world in order to promote their gospel. So doing, they survive, and even prosper, but they open themselves up to constant challenges to their authority. In a sense, they are secularized by their co-existence with profanity[v]" and thus must constantly reinvent themselves in order to survive today (p. 19).

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Notes

[i] Often non-denominational in scope and moderate in belief
[ii] Exemplified in non-denominational institutions
[iii] Outlined by Castells (1996) as *timeless time* and *space of flows*
[iv] An online digitally simulated world in which users create and live a 'second life' of their own design.
[v] Profanity in this sense refers to the profane, or more specifically, the dialectical opposite of the sacred. If the word of God is sacred, then the word of the non-believer is profane. In the network society, by opening itself up by allowing for online dissemination, the Church also invites criticism from those who do not have faith.