

New Religions in Web 2.0 World: Navigating the Landscape

by Claire Davis

New communication and Internet technologies have created a dynamic new media landscape that has changed the face of religion in two decades. From the early days of the World Wide Web in the 1990s, the conversation on religion in cyberspace has been, and continues to be, highly prolific. Over time the Internet has established itself as the foremost marketplace of religious ideas, ultimately drawing even the most reluctant of the faithful into its spaces, including unconventional new religions.

The phenomenon of how the Internet and religion are interfacing is the subject of Heidi Campbell's volume *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, published by Routledge in 2013. The contributors to this volume explore the often contentious relationship between religion and cyberspace. Campbell, an associate professor of communication studies at Texas A&M University, appropriated the term "digital religion" to describe how digital media are both shaping and being shaped by religious practice.

According to *Digital Religion*, Web 2.0 upped the ante for religious cyber-engagement from the use of unidirectional web pages to interactional functions and social media. In Campbell's view, these interactional dynamics essentially "force religious groups to adapt to evolving definitions of religious practice and identity". In the process, religious identity and practice is often reshaped or transformed. "Religion is taking place in a digital environment and becomes informed by the ideology of new media," Campbell states, "which can alter not only the practice but the meaning-making process itself."

Many religious movements recognized early on the potential of this new dimension as a space for representation and recruitment, and were eager to stake out their claim on cyberspace. Others were initially hesitant, and debated potential risks of spiritual corrosion and moral decline from engaging in the mixed-messaging of the Net.

Reservations notwithstanding, religious organizations are catching the trend of Web 2.0.

A recent study proclaimed the Pope as the world leader with the most clout on twitter. Religious messages are ubiquitous on Youtube and Facebook, and in virtual community gaming spaces such as "Second Life" and "World of Warcraft". i-Bible and Quran apps proliferate, while at WikiWorship congregants help edit sermons. Wiccan groups host online rituals, and the Catholic Church has confessional apps that guide believers through the sacrament of penance. Meanwhile, the Church of Norway is creating an electronic collection basket for text message contributions.

What about New Religions?

Less attention has been focused on the impact of Web 2.0 on new religious movements. For many, the concept of new religions conjures up images of the countercultural 60s variety: colorful Hare Krishna devotees chanting in the streets, Children of God picketing in sackcloth, or the mass weddings of the Moonies. How have the range of new religious movements, often popularly associated with controversy, adapted to or been reshaped by new media?

New religions began to surface online in the mid-1990s, seeking an active role in shaping the narrative that would define them in the modern mass-mediated public sphere. In their quest for legitimacy, representation, and a voice in cyberspace, many new religions have struggled to navigate the often contested spaces of the Internet. The culture of transparency that characterizes the Web has obligated countercultural new religions to disclose previously private realms of religious belief and practice for public scrutiny.

Their emergence on the Internet came in the aftermath of what Canadian sociologist Susan Palmer referred to as “the embattled terrain known as the cult wars” of the 1980s to the early 1990s. According to professor of history Philip Jenkins, “the media manipulation of a variety of interest groups” of that period painted a sinister picture of new religions that continues to linger in the public imagination to this day. This has resulted in what UK sociologist Eileen Barker considers an “abundance of evidence that new religious movements have been and continue to be discriminated against disproportionately on account of their being new” and negative perceptions of their unconventional beliefs, lifestyles, and practices.

Many new religions use their online presence strategically to counter discrimination and negative depictions of their movement. The Twelve Tribes, a fundamentalist Christian communal movement founded in the 1970s, has leveraged the Internet to decry what spokesperson Jean Swantko referred to as “the intrusion of government into the realm of religious practice”. In September 2013, the German authorities seized 36 children from a Twelve Tribes community, alleging that their practice of spanking their children constituted abuse. In response, Twelve Tribes members have continued to blog their protests of the seizure of the children, and hosted an online petition for the return of their children (www.twelvetribes.org).

In other cases, the process of interfacing with and accommodating to the Web has proved transformative. A case in point is the Family International (formerly the Children of God), a controversial Christian communal movement emergent from the Jesus People of the 1960s. The movement initially approached the Internet with trepidation and warned its members to “Watch out for the Web”. In 2010, however, after 15 years of growing engagement in online community forums, it disassembled its communal structure and reinvented itself as a virtual community. Sociologists Gary and Gordon Shepherd defined the Family International’s reinvention as “a dramatic transformation from a collectivist communal society” to a “radically individualized cyber form of guidance and support”.

A Site of Contention

While media attention on new religions has diminished since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the States, the Internet has become the foremost site of contention for new religions. Cyberspace is replete with “X” (or ex) sites featuring disaffected former member narratives, such

as X-Scientology and X-Moonies, and sensationalized media accounts and anti-websites of every stripe. Hollywood media and bloggers have jumped on the bandwagon with posts that present an unsavory twist to the upbringing of celebrities raised in alternative religious movements.

It can be a daunting prospect for religious minorities to gain the upper hand in impression management on the Internet. Few have the resources and capital to out-message their opponents, though some have met with success.

The Mormon Church has been at the forefront of developing successful strategies for online impression management. Stephen Allen, head of the church's missionary department, was reported by Michelle Boorstein of the Washington Post as stating: "We're jumping into the conversation because there is a big one going on about Mormons, and we want to be a part of it. When someone goes into Google, if the first 10 sites are people who hate us, we lose in terms of our message."

The competition can be fierce between the faithful and their critics and disenchanted ex-members to dominate what information the public will access when they hit the search engines. Scientology has launched numerous campaigns to counter negative content online about their movement, which it has designated as "hate speech". According to BBC's David Lee, Scientology's success in battles with Wikipedia, Wikileaks and Anonymous to remove content from the Web have "changed the Internet". These campaigns have also raised polemical issues regarding the boundaries of freedom of speech on the Internet and the right to religious freedom, as articulated in the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The majority of new religions lack the resources to undertake costly marketing and web ad campaigns, a tactic that Scientology has adopted in the online information wars, according to spokesperson Karin Pouw. Nor can they afford to engage in the complex business of "search engine optimization" to attempt to raise the rankings of their sites on search engines, a strategy that has been successfully leveraged by the Latter Day Saints.

A New Frontier

The religious debate has repositioned itself largely in the realm of cyberspace, which has proved to be a contentious and unregulated frontier. New religions, in their online quest for legitimacy, tolerance, and the free exercise of religion, continue to test society's ability to accommodate, or at least tolerate, unconventional movements that challenge societal and cultural norms.

Cyberspace has become a game-changing platform of religious negotiation for new religious movements. The Web has afforded them a means of establishing religious identity and legitimacy, communicating with membership, attracting recruits, and responding to critics and opposition. It has equally provided a space for counter-narratives, whether true or false, that can be damaging to the movements due to the permanence of information on the Web. Navigating this cyber-landscape is bound to continue reshaping and redefining new religions, as they adapt to the evolving realities of a Web 2.0 world.

Claire Davis is a graduate student in intercultural and international communication at Royal Roads University in Canada.