Digital Christianity
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Digital media today are integrated into the fabric of society, forming part of the infrastructure of daily life. The "cyberspace" popularized by 1980s science fiction and early internet commentary was imagined as a separate reality, in which alternate identities could be explored, hierarchies would be destabilized and new kinds of relationships and communities could form. Some of these aspirations remain, but today's internet is "embodied, embedded and everyday" (Hine 2015). Digital technologies are essential to the functioning of routines, networks and institutions in society, and our online activity is often linked to our real names and faces. The digital landscape has become so integral to existence that it fades easily into the background of our consciousness. Like any infrastructure, the digital now returns to our awareness only when it acts to surprise us – by breaking down, or by doing something new.

Christian interest in the potential of computer technologies dates back to the 1940s, when Catholic priest and scholar Roberto Busa began working with IBM to analyze the writings of Thomas Aquinas. This fascination with archiving, automation and analysis continues today, for example in the vast marketplace of Bible study software. The advent of computer-mediated communication, the internet and the rise of the World Wide Web raised new possibilities, and in the 1980s and 1990s Christians began finding ways to build online networks for conversation, evangelism and prayer. In 1986, a Presbyterian discussion group called Presbynet created one of the first experiments in online worship in response to the Challenger space shuttle disaster. David Lochhead, one of the first pioneers of theological evaluation of computer-mediated communication, recalls this memorial liturgy as an event that 'demonstrated the power of the computer medium to unite a community in a time of crisis beyond the limits of geography or denomination' (1997: 52).

Early encounters with cyberspace inspired and excited some Christians, while others looked on with great concern. In 1985, one online church promised to liberate Christians from the distractions of flesh, hiding those who might be 'fat, short, beautiful or ugly' to ensure that believers could at last worship in the freedom of the spirit. This quote is included the Church of England's strikingly-titled report *Cybernauts Awake!* (Church of England Board for Social Responsibility 1999: Chapter 5), which proposed a more balanced approach while still exhorting Christians to engage online. The Vatican also produced cautious reports, arguing that the internet can enrich Catholic faith, but must not be allowed to distort it. In *The Church and Internet*, for example, we read that 'the virtual reality of cyberspace cannot substitute for real interpersonal community' (Pontifical Council 2002: para. 9), and that Church or even state intervention might be needed to crack down on websites spreading false doctrine and anti-Catholic hate (para. 8). Nonetheless, many early onlookers saw the rise of digital Christianity as inevitable. Barna, the evangelical Christian polling agency, claimed in *The Cyberchurch is Coming* (1998) that millions would soon be leaving churches to rely on the internet for all their spiritual resources.

As computer-mediated communication has evolved, so Christian online activity and academic analysis has changed with it. Beginning in the late 1990s, the first studies of religion and the internet looked for ritual innovations, described emerging cultures and tried to demonstrate that online relationships, communities and religious practices really were significant for their participants. Recent work builds on these origins, but emphasizes the embeddedness of the digital in wider social, cultural and religious contexts. Instead of leaving local congregations to go to church online, we now know that Christians have found ways to combine different modes of participation and belonging. Heidi Campbell defines Digital

Religion as "the technological and cultural space that is evoked when we talk about how online and offline religious spheres have become blended or integrated" (2013: 3), and this complex blending continues to fascinate researchers today.

In my own research on self-described "online churches", I encountered very few new converts. The majority of online participants regularly attended a local church as well, sometimes visiting on a Sunday morning and coming home to join their online congregation in the evening. Some participants were unable to attend a local church because of disability, negative experiences or theological disagreement, but even this minority had been part of a local congregation in the past. The internet allowed my research participants to connect with believers around the world for conversation, debate or prayer. For some, online church provided an opportunity to participate in what they saw as an experimental, ground-breaking new form of ministry. For others, the main appeal was the chance to hear sermons from preachers they admired. Another key attraction was anonymity: the online church was a private and therefore safe space for many participants, a network of support that their offline friends, family and congregations did not know about. Some churchgoers were happy to blend their different social worlds, but others insisted on keeping them strictly separate.

Many of the online church leaders I spoke to expressed concern with the transience of digital culture and tried to encourage their audiences to a higher level of commitment. If participants gathered together around a screen in a member's home, or spent time each week in a private chatroom, these leaders hoped, perhaps some of the accountability and discipline of a local congregation could be replicated online. In practice, these kinds of initiatives rarely attracted much support: online engagement is fluid and self-directed, and participants move smoothly in and out of different online networks as their own tastes and needs require.

These comments indicate some of the complex effects of the internet on Christian structures and perceptions of authority. The internet allows Christians to access information, news and commentary from diverse perspectives, including theological teaching, preaching and ministry. It also makes it easier to disconnect and move on from a source of authority when their message or behavior ceases to appeal. New voices can rise to prominence if they attract sufficient attention, whether or not they have received official training and authorization within their tradition. Critical voices and campaigns can gain attention more easily, forging networks of like-minded individuals who might never meet offline.

This chaotic situation can undermine established Christian leaders, but it can also play to their advantage. Pauline Cheong identifies two competing logics of digital religious authority: displacement and disjuncture, or complementarity and continuity (Cheong 2013). The Vatican has expressed concern that the Internet would confuse the faithful with false teachings (Pontifical Council 2002: para. 8), but quickly built its own website to help communicate directly with Catholics and other interested audiences around the world. More recently, Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis both developed a high-profile presence on social media, distributing prayers and advice to millions of followers. Pope Francis uses Instagram to share his own image, and has posed for selfies. The internet has helped liberal and conservative Catholics to network and amplify their criticisms of the Church, but it has also supported moves to personalize the Church in the thoughts and image of the Pope.

The internet has also been embraced by Christians whose ideas receive less institutional support. Paolo Apolito's *The Internet and the Madonna* (2005) explores online networks emerging around Catholic visions and prophecies, a phenomenon which has often met with official disapproval. Robert Howard's *Digital Jesus* (2011) is a long-term study of fundamentalist networks, showing how internet users with an interest in biblical End Times prophecy build an audience for their predictions. Both projects demonstrate the ability of independent Christian voices to connect online, with or without official approval.

Charismatic and Pentecostal ministries are making use of similar network dynamics on a much larger scale. One of the transformative technologies for online Christianity has been streaming video, which introduced new opportunities for preachers, prophets and healers. Older technologies, like mailing lists, chatrooms, forums or blogs, favored text-based practices like prayer, liturgy and conversation. Video favors performance. On a live-stream, one preacher can captivate a vast audience with emotive and visually compelling content. Brad Christerson and Richard Flory (2017) have studied what they term the INCs, or Independent Networked Charismatics, and the internet is central to their explanation of why this category is growing so quickly around the world. INCs avoid denominationalism, preferring to build loose networks while retaining their freedom to experiment with the power of the Holy Spirit. The most influential INC ministries use the internet to share conferences, preaching, high-energy worship sessions and displays of supernatural power, and can now draw more of their income from web sales of their videos, books and access to livestreams than from their congregation's tithes. The authors report that many INC Christians participate in events and training camps and consume web-based content instead of joining a local congregation (2017: 81), suggesting that this form of Christianity may be a rare exception to the general trend of digital complementarity outlined above.

Scholars of media, religion and culture draw on a range of theoretical approaches (summarized by Campbell 2017). The *mediatization* approach argues that media have their own distinctive logic, a way of operating, to which all other institutions in society must adapt (Hjarvard 2008). Heidi Campbell (2010) has proposed an alternative model, the *Religious-Social Shaping of Technology*, giving more independence to religious groups. RSST is a process of negotiation in which a community evaluates and adapts a new technology to fit its own values, beliefs and practices. Christian organizations are often motivated by a desire to engage with wider society, to evangelize, to promote social change or to demonstrate their continued relevance in contexts of secularization. Christian technology projects therefore tend to combine reflection on Christian values with ideas about audience expectations and media logics, adopted from technology consultants and business experts – a process of *Mediatized Religious Design* (Hutchings 2017). Other scholars have focused their attention on the audience, exploring the processes through which consumers use media to find meaning in their lives (Hoover 2006) or to encounter the sacred outside traditional religious settings (Lynch 2012). To date, these different approaches have tended to rely on qualitative methods, particularly interviews and media ethnographies, and new digital methods will be needed in future to engage more thoroughly with the possibilities of digital data (see Cheruvallil-Contractor and Shakkour 2015).

More ambitiously, studies of mediation can also challenge our understanding of religion itself. As Jeremy Stolow has argued, we need to consider religion *as* media (Stolow 2005). Media are not secondary in importance to the cognitive dimension of beliefs, doctrines and experience: instead, they are essential to what religion is and how it works. Sacred texts, images, clothes, television broadcasts and websites are just some of the ways in which adherents are connected to the divine and to each other. Birgit Meyer defines religion as 'a practice of mediation between humans and the professed transcendent' (2012: 8), and argues that each religious group develops a range of authorized 'sensational forms' through which this mediation is allowed to take place. In official Catholic teaching, the sacramental presence of God does not extend through the screen: the sacraments can only occur when priest and congregation are physically together. In contrast, many Charismatic and Pentecostal preachers invite audiences to receive healing, blessing and spiritual power directly through their internet connection. Nigerian pastor TB Joshua, for example, invites his viewers to place their hands on the screen while watching him on Emmanuel TV or YouTube. These groups authorize

different media and different sensational forms, supporting different constructions of the relationship between God and humanity.

Digital media are now part of the infrastructure of Christianity, operating to extend the work of Christian institutions while also supporting the emergence of new independent voices and networks. By studying the digital presence of Christian ministries, groups and practitioners, we can gain new insight into themes of great importance for the study of Christians, including presence, embodiment, community and authority. Digital media are used to develop and perform Christian identities, make contact across faith group boundaries, and coordinate campaigns for social or religious change. They can be used to exchange support or to harass, to find safe private communication spaces or to conduct surveillance. Digital media continue to gain in social significance and sophistication, and attention to digital networks, experiences and innovations is increasingly important for any attempt to study Christians today.

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