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Andrea Rota, Oliver Krüger (Eds.)

The Dynamics of Religion, Media, and Community

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Fabian Huber

Tim Hutchings

Isabelle Jonveaux

Dorothea Lüddeckens

Anna Neumaier

Andrea Rota

Alessandra Vitullo

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The Dynamics of Religion, Media, and Community

An Introduction

Andrea Rota and Oliver Krüger

Abstract

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

Keywords

Media; Religious community; Digital religion; Heidi Campbell

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

¹ This special issue draws to a large extent on the discussions held during the conference “The Dynamics of Religion, Media, and Community”, which took place at the University of Fribourg in September 2017. The conference was organized in connection with our research project *Die Dynamik von Mediennutzung und den Formen religiöser Vergemeinschaftung*, conducted under the patronage of the Swiss National Science Foundation. A heartfelt thank you goes to the two other members of our research team, Fabian Huber and Evelyne Felder, for their engagement, enthusiasm, and support throughout the research project. We would also like to express our gratitude to the *Fonds d’Action Facultaire* of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Fribourg and to the *Bürgergemeinde Bern*, which made the professional language editing of this issue possible. Finally, we would like to thank Dr. Brian Donahoe and the journal editors for expertly helping us to finalize this work.

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

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

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

1 Religion and Community

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

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

The nature of human bonds and the conditions of their possibility are among the fundamental concerns of political philosophy (e.g., Hume 1896; Montesquieu 1748; Rousseau 1762). Since the second half of the nineteenth century, the nascent science of sociology sought to reframe the philosophical debate and provide new answers to these questions (Aron 1967). Against the backdrop of accelerating industrialization and urbanization, the concept of *Gemeinschaft* – and its dynamic reinterpretation as a process of *Vergemeinschaftung*, or ‘communalization’ – provided the early sociologists with a foil for reflecting on the evolving forms of collective life in a societal context (*Gesellschaft*, *Vergesellschaftung*). Despite their different theoretical frameworks, the likes of Ferdinand Tönnies (1912 [1887]), Max Weber (1978 [1921]), and Emile Durkheim (1984 [1893]) all endeavored to explain the progressive transformation of human coexistence from an idealized time³ in which human interactions were based on personal contacts and devoid of utilitarian intents toward a social condition characterized by the rise of impersonal, purposive exchanges.

The study of religious life and its evolution constituted an important resource for early theoretical reflections on the idea of community. Yet, the founding fathers of sociology anticipated a descending trajectory for both religion and community with the rise of modern society. Max Weber (1934 [1904–05]) famously identified the initial impulse toward the increasing rationalization of social relationships in the religious ethics of Calvinism. For Durkheim (1995 [1912]), religious practices and beliefs have their origin in the emotions of collective rituals and result in the sacralization of society itself. However, in his view, the social transformation away from the mechanical solidarity of small groups⁴ weakens religion’s capacity to play an integrative role at a social level and promotes the reverence of individual autonomy (Durkheim 1898, 1984 [1893], pp. 118–123).⁵ Drawing on these insights, sociologists emphasized the connection between religion and

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2 Religion and Media

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

Early research was partly driven by the idea that religion on the Internet would rapidly and completely replace traditional religious forms. Stephen D. O’Leary (2004, p. 40), Lynn Schofield Clark (2002, p. 7), Hubert Mohr (2009, p. 180), and Christopher Helland assumed that online religion would introduce freedom, democracy, and diversity to the religious field, much as the Reformation did 500 years ago. According to Helland (2004, p. 30), thanks to the Internet, “[D]octrines and teachings that were once centralized and controlled can now be openly challenged, contradicted, or ignored through a medium that is accessed by hundreds of millions of people every day.” The first generation of scholars in this domain imagined that traditional hierarchies would be overcome by an egalitarian network society; Helland even claimed that the experience of online religions was equivalent to the state of *communitas* that Victor Turner postulated as the central element of rites of passage:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4 A Dynamic Model

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

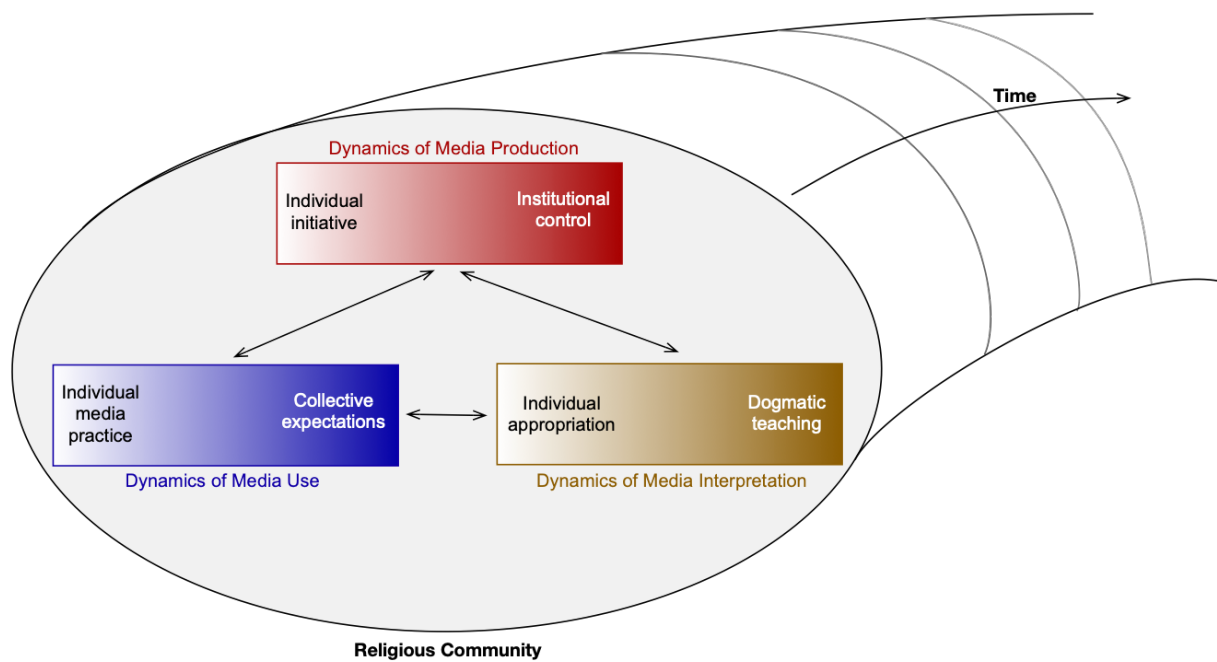


Figure 1: The Dynamics of Religion, Media, and Community

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Biography

Prof. Dr. ANDREA ROTA studied science of religion, contemporary history, and social anthropology at the University of Fribourg (Switzerland). He held postdoctoral positions at the Universities of Bayreuth, Fribourg, and Bern, where he is currently Assistant Professor in the Institute for the Science of Religion. His main research interests are the public presence of religion (with particular attention to public schools), the history of religion and the social sciences, the use of media technologies in religious contexts, and philosophical theories of collective action.

Contact: andrea.rota@relwi.unibe.ch

Prof. Dr. OLIVER KRÜGER studied sociology, classical archeology, and science of religion at the University of Bonn. Since 2007 he has been the Chair for Religious Studies in the Social Science Department at Fribourg University (Switzerland). He specializes in sociology of religion, media and religion, as well as post-/transhumanism.

Contact: oliver.krueger@unifr.ch