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# The Dynamics of Religion, Media, and Community

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# Christian Online Communities

## Insights from Qualitative and Quantitative Data

Anna Neumaier

### Abstract

Since the rise of the Internet, traditional religious communities have either embraced or struggled with new media. At the same time, a significant number of believers turns to new media as a substitute for or supplement to offline communities. Researching these users raises some crucial questions that guide my contribution: Do these users find or build communities online and, if so, how do these communities differ from offline equivalents, and how can they be grasped theoretically? Based on findings from a quantitative survey among Christian Internet users, I will first illustrate the emergence of personal relationships among Internet discussion board users and their perception of an actual online community. Then, based on qualitative research, I will elaborate three types of community existing within the discussion boards. Relating these types to classical (Weber, Tönnies) as well as recent (Anderson, Hitzler, Hepp) theoretical approaches to community, I will argue that the characteristics of social media do not unidirectionally determine any specific kind of community online. Rather, the needs of users as well as their offline religious affiliations are decisive and result in a broad range of online communities that can mirror such traditional forms as the *Dorfgemeinschaft*, as well as more recent types such as imagined or posttraditional communities.

### Keywords

Religion; Internet; Religious community; Online community; Community theory; Christian

### 1 Introduction

Since the rise of the Internet, traditional religious communities have either embraced or struggled with new media. At the same time, believers turn to the Internet in search of alternative spaces for

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religion-related purposes. In social networks, on picture or video sharing sites, blogs and discussion boards, users debate religion and beliefs, share representations of their religious identities, and conduct mediated religious activities such as mutual prayers. In doing so, long-lasting ties between users emerge. Some users choose online platforms as their preferred place to go for religious purposes, complementing or even superseding local religious alternatives. This raises questions for research on religious Internet use: What makes online spaces suitable and attractive for religious use? To what extent can the use of the Internet for religious purposes replace or complement offline religious affiliations and/or activities? What are the relative advantages and disadvantages of online and offline religious activities?

Many distinct aspects can be considered in this regard. In the following, I will focus on ‘community’ as a potential feature of online spaces. This choice is based on the assumption that ‘community’ is often a distinct attribute of the offline manifestations of religious traditions, especially in the context of Christian traditions (which comprise the field of research presented here). If online platforms are to be taken seriously as potential new places for debates on and practice of religion, their capacity to enable religious communality must be addressed. This quality is of specific importance for any kind of comparison to offline religious institutions and social contexts: if online platforms are capable of being used to create and sustain religious communities, they are potentially able to substitute for an important feature of offline religion. And if they are not, but are still perceived by some as the main hub for religious activities, it would imply that communality is, to a certain extent, obsolete. Therefore, we must ask whether the respective online platforms offer features of community-like sociality, or if community becomes obsolete in the process of religion going online (or, as a third possibility, if community has already become obsolete in offline contexts as well).

To grapple with these questions, I will present findings from a study of online Christian discussion boards and their users. While most existing research mainly considers the platforms themselves – their media characteristics and their potential for community building – I will prioritize the users’ views on the emergence of social relationships and, more specifically, on communities during their use of discussion boards. This has its rationale in my theoretical approach, which I will elaborate after a short summary of existing research on this topic. Subsequently, I will present quantitative as well as qualitative data on the emergence of communities in religious Internet use, and discuss them in light of the theoretical approaches. My key argument here is that no specific form of ‘online community’ emerges that can be said to characterize this field, nor are the forms of community that appear online limited to those described in contemporary studies of transformations of communities and networks. Rather, the needs of users as well as their offline religious affiliations are decisive and result in a broad range of online communities that can

resemble such traditional forms as the *Dorfgemeinschaft* (village community), as well as more recent types such as ‘imagined’ or ‘posttraditional communities’.

## 2 The Old, the New, and the Virtual? An Overview of Community Theory

Debates on community have long suggested that along with changes in society and media come changes in community: close-knit, face-to-face communities (for example, those that result from cohabitation in a nineteenth-century village) transform slowly over time into translocal communities or, perhaps more accurately, networks of loosely bound individuals. However, with regard to community theory, this teleological account deserves a closer look. A thorough examination is also needed to develop the research instruments to study online communities, since such instruments need to specify quite precisely the unit of analysis – that is, community – in order to be able to look for it in the process of data analysis.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the questions guiding this section are: What concepts frame the sociological debate about community? What is their relationship to contemporary developments in society and the influence of media in that regard? And how can they be operationalized for empirical research?

Early but still influential approaches to community include those by Ferdinand Tönnies and Max Weber. In his volume *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (first published in 1887), Tönnies distinguishes *Gemeinschaft* (community) from *Gesellschaft* (society). Community is “real and organic life” (*reales und organisches Leben*; Tönnies 2005, p. 3), whereas society is, in Tönnies’s understanding, a rather mechanical entity. Community here relates to a familiar, intimate, exclusive mode of living together and being with one’s kin from birth, while society is something that one enters as a stranger (*ibid.*). Compared to cohabitation in society, which is transient and superficial, life in a community is enduring, a long-lasting condition of genuinely living together.<sup>2</sup> Max Weber’s approach is similar to a certain extent. However, his distinction between *Vergemeinschaftung* and *Vergesellschaftung* focuses on the processes of how communities and societies emerge and persist. In his conceptualization, communities are characterized by a feeling of belonging together, which is experienced individually and works on an affective or traditional basis. In contrast, society is rooted in the rationally motivated balance of interests (Weber 2005, p. 29).

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<sup>1</sup> In a larger research project on religious Internet use, other social forms such as groups and networks were also included. The findings, however, suggested that for understanding religion-related social interactions online, the different concepts of ‘community’ corresponded better to the empirical data. For an elaboration on this issue, see Neumaier 2016, 264–77.

<sup>2</sup> “[D]as dauernde und echte Zusammenleben, Gesellschaft nur rein vorübergehendes und scheinbares” (Tönnies 2005, p. 5).

Both Weber and Tönnies consider families to be core types of community, but also regard neighborhoods and other types of close cohabitation, as well as shared attitudes, as bases for communities (ibid.; Tönnies 2005, pp. 8–14). Among those communities based on ‘shared attitudes’, Tönnies includes religious communities, which can exist regardless of geographical proximity because, according to Tönnies, religious beliefs are a particularly stable basis for a feeling of belonging together (ibid.). Weber’s approach is similar, although he emphasizes the procedural nature when he introduces *Vergemeinschaftung* (formation of community) and *Vergesellschaftung* (formation of society) instead of *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society). In his understanding, it is not simply the shared beliefs that are a sufficient condition for defining a community, but ultimately the sense of belonging that leads members to orient themselves toward each other (Weber 2005, pp. 30–31).<sup>3</sup> So while these approaches were developed within a specific historical context and the archetypal picture of a community is that of a close-knit village community in contrast to the groupings that form in conditions of accelerating urbanization, Tönnies and Weber also point out other forms of community, among them a *Gemeinschaft des Geistes* (‘community of the mind’), where a high degree of like-mindedness among its members makes up for a lack of shared bloodlines or place of residence.

In more recent times and due to societal changes, there has been extensive reflection among scholars of different disciplines on the dimensions of community. In 1983, Benedict Anderson proposed the idea of an ‘imagined community’. Referring mainly to nation-states, he depicted the image of a community where members neither know one another nor live together: “[T]he members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them” (Anderson 2006, p. 6). Nevertheless, they experience the nation as “a deep, horizontal comradeship” (ibid., p. 7), feel connected to each other, and are willing to die or kill for the community. In his view, this concept of an ‘imagined community’ is applicable to every community too big to allow for face-to-face interaction.

While Anderson developed his concept in the early 1980s, in the wake of more recent processes of postindustrialization, globalization, and mediatization a number of related approaches have developed the idea of not only translocal, but also non-binding communities. Ronald Hitzler, for example, has coined the term ‘posttraditional community’, which refers to a community that one is not born into, but becomes a member of by choice, based on the shared interests of the individual members (Hitzler 2008). As a consequence, it does not embrace its members in their entirety, but only connects to parts of their identity. Moreover, these communities, as well as membership in them, only last for a limited time. Altogether, these kinds of communities are regarded as optional and fluid (Hitzler et al., pp. 17–18). For the time being, though, members of the community adopt

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<sup>3</sup> See also Huber in this special issue.

shared signs, symbols and rituals, a distinct awareness of the community, and clear-cut external borders. As such, the community turns out to be relatively stable despite its temporary existence (ibid., p. 16).

A similar concept is that of the ‘deterritorial community’ as developed by Andreas Hepp. In Hepp’s approach, a deterritorial community is one type of translocal community that is characterized specifically by ultimately abandoning any local references. Examples can be found in communities that coalesce around subjects from popular culture, social movements, or religious communities (Hepp 2008, p. 135, Fig. 1). Again, it is the feeling of belonging together and a shared horizon of meaning – which extend beyond any territory – that are important for these kinds of communities; Hepp here, in fact, refers to Weber (ibid., p. 133). Nevertheless, Hepp describes these deterritorial communities as exhibiting local agglomerations, which are marked by face-to-face-interaction and local roots, but then form an overarching network with a shared translocal horizon of meaning (ibid., p. 133–4). Apart from that, deterritorial and posttraditional communities share basic features, foremost being that they are both communities of choice.

A ‘community’ can, therefore, be defined by drawing on a spectrum of characteristics. From a systematizing perspective, the diverse characteristics described in the various approaches can be categorized into three sets: a) physical properties; b) action-related properties; and c) symbolic or idea-related properties. *Physical attributes* of a community generally refer to living in close proximity to one another (e.g., in one house, street, or village) and knowing one another face-to-face. These aspects are often associated with classical approaches like those of Weber and Tönnies, although those approaches do not focus exclusively on close-knit village communities, but also include symbolic togetherness. *Action-related properties* include internal interaction and support as well as shared rituals and activities. The approaches discussed above do not foreground these aspects, although exchange, communication, support or other joint activities play a role in almost all of the approaches, and with the Internet, communication as a basis for a community takes on a particularly important role. With regard to *symbolic or idea-related properties*, the various approaches often only mention a ‘corporate feeling’ or a ‘shared identity’. Others go into greater detail, referring not only to the feeling of belonging together, but also to shared norms, values, narratives, and frameworks of interpretation, recognition of the external borders of the community, and relationships to individuals (rather than professional roles) – in a nutshell, the awareness of being a member of a community.

All attributes of communities that are mentioned in the approaches discussed above can be assigned to one of these categories. However, it is important to note that different approaches define different characteristics as *sine qua non* for the existence of a community. With regard to online communities, some hypotheses suggest themselves. Above all, local proximity and face-to-face interaction and acquaintanceship seem obsolete and insignificant for a scientific analysis. Rather,



the translocal and anonymous exchange online seems to promote only temporal and non-binding relations, which may fit in with the transformation of communities diagnosed by recent approaches. In the following, I will have a closer look at approaches focusing specifically on online communities, then at some empirical data that suggest a more complex picture of religious communities on the Internet.

### 3 Online Religious Communities – The State of Research and Some Questions

With the rise of the Internet, questions about the possibility of communities within this medium started to gain in importance. Similar to the three waves of research on religion and the Internet described by Højsgaard and Warburg (2005), Heidi Campbell finds three waves of research on online communities (Campbell 2013, pp. 60–4).<sup>4</sup> Studies in the first wave approach this field with fascination, sometimes fall for utopian or dystopian discourses, and mostly restrict themselves to describing community formation online (ibid., pp. 60–1.). These are followed, around the turn of the millennium, by a second wave of research that moves toward a critical analysis of online communities, examining different forms of online communities and querying the relationship between online and offline communities (ibid., pp. 61–2). Since then, increasingly theoretical perspectives on online communities have developed that apply, for example, theories of social capital or organization identity and ask refined questions about the relationship between offline communities and their use of online technologies (ibid., pp. 63–4). Campbell concludes that recent research points to changes in traditional forms of community and to online groups functioning as “loose social networks with varying levels of religious affiliation and commitment” (ibid., p. 64).

As Campbell shows, there has been a broad range of research on online religious communities. However, only a few publications ever clearly define their understanding of community. Probably best known are the early understandings of Howard Rheingold and Barry Wellman, which describe online communities in general, without a specific focus on religion.<sup>5</sup> In the early 1990s, Howard Rheingold coined the term ‘virtual community’, referring to relationships of users that emerge if “enough people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (Rheingold 1993, p. 5). Only a few years later, an understanding of ‘networks’ as predominant social forms within the Internet became prominent, represented by, among others, Wellman, who argues that “the Net successfully maintains strong, supportive community ties, and it may be increasing the number and diversity of

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<sup>4</sup> See also Vitullo in this special issue.

<sup>5</sup> In this regard, see also Baym 1998, Deterding 2008, Etzioni & Etzioni 1999, Jones 1998, Kollock & Smith 1999.

weak ties. [...] Indeed, the very architecture of computer networks promotes market-like situations” (Wellman 1999, pp. 185–6).

From the early 2000s on, research on online religion also considered questions of online religious communities. Among the earliest was probably Dawson, with the considerations he put forward in his chapter “Religion and the Quest for Virtual Community” (Dawson 2004). Based on the premise that, for most people, being religious still implies being part of a group (Dawson 2004, p. 75), he addresses doubts about the emergence of online communities as well as methodological questions regarding research on online communities. In this regard, he discusses two common misconceptions, emphasizing that communities are often “associated too much with a romanticized notion of life in the small towns and villages of the past”, and that religious life is “associated too much with a Western congregational model” while traditional communities are being rapidly replaced by social networks (Dawson 2004, p. 76). The crucial question, then, is how to detect a community online or, to put it in other words, how the concept of community can be operationalized. Dawson here suggests interactivity, stability of membership as well as of identity, ‘netizenship’ (i.e., regular use of the Internet), social control, personal concern, and occurrence in a public space as crucial aspects of the existence of a virtual community (Dawson 2004, p. 83). In an early empirical study of online community members, Campbell focuses on key attributes of online religious communities that the users themselves find desirable: relationship, care (giving and receiving support and encouragement), value (being valued as an individual), connection (frequent contact with their online partners), intimate communication (going beyond the small talk), and shared faith (Campbell 2005, pp. 181–6.). In contrast to Dawson, she emphasizes rather the emotional and supportive interaction between users as a criterion for the existence of an online religious community. Nonetheless, both approaches can be brought together, as some of Campbell’s criteria correlate with Dawson’s ‘personal concern’, while some aspects that Dawson identified – e.g., long-lasting interaction – might be preconditions for precisely this kind of care and intimacy. However, in a later study, Campbell herself argues for understanding online communities as networks because doing so would mirror general developments in contemporary society:

Today, the image of a community bound strictly to geographic, ethnic, or culturally fixed relationships does not always seem applicable, especially within Western urban society. [...] This tendency towards dynamic networked identity also arguably informs practices of public religion. (Campbell 2013, pp. 66–68).

Other researchers differentiate between distinct types of community. Kim, for example, recognizes four types of religious community that can also be found online: a belief community that provides a system of beliefs and practices; a relational community that satisfies the need for belonging; an

affective community that provides a group identity; and a utilitarian community that provides a means of resource mobilization (Kim 2005, p. 147). He argues, however, that online religious communities can fulfill more than one or even all of these functions. On the other hand, not every user seeks all of these functions from online communities; for example, someone may have no need for belonging (*ibid.*). Hutchings, in a study of online churches, differentiates between the Rheingold definition of community and an alternative approach that criticizes online communities as merely virtual, that is, unreal, and puts face-to-face interaction at the core of community (Hutchings 2015). He argues that his case, the ‘Church of Fools’, a virtual Christian church sponsored by the Methodist Church of England, can in fact be considered a community on the strength of its users’ relationships, their sense of belonging and their support, while the face-to-face meetings – which indeed do occur – did not play an essential role in that regard (*ibid.*, p. 160–1).

Finally, others scholars propose concepts different from ‘community’ altogether. Lundby, in discussing Dawson’s approach, votes for the concept of ‘belonging’ instead of ‘community’ to better grasp the developments online as well as the connections between online and offline (Lundby 2011, p. 1219). Additionally, he finds it more promising to look for “specific processes of identification and interaction” than to try “to capture a community in its entirety” (*ibid.*, p. 1221). Finally, he points out that religion online does not necessarily need a base in “such strictly defined ‘virtual communities’” as Dawson is searching for (*ibid.*, p. 1231).

To put it briefly, we find diverging views regarding whether community or network – or even belonging, as Lundby argues – might be the right analytical concept. This may be due to a number of factors. First, findings indicate that the specific media form within the online context is decisive: while purely interactional platforms such as discussion boards may be more suited to enabling a community of users, blogs may provide only sparse interactions and thereby lead to networks rather than communities (Teusner 2011). Websites, in contrast, may offer a broad range of options, including possibilities of interaction (Foltz & Foltz 2003). Another important factor to consider is whether the research focus is on the online platforms’ possibilities, the actual use, or the users’ interpretation of it. We may find platforms suited for the emergence of communities that are not used in that way; conversely, a platform may not be suited for the emergence of a community, but users may feel that they are part of a community nevertheless. Finally, and most important for my purposes here, the definitions of community – and alternative concepts – are crucial to determining which aspects are decisive for detecting religious community online: can a community take the form of a network, or are the two terms mutually exclusive; in other words, do the concepts describe different social forms? While many approaches seem to understand ‘network’ as a subtype of ‘community’ (Campbell 2005, pp. 36–9), I understand the two as distinct concepts. Community refers to a social entity that can be emotionally or symbolically charged and is perceived as such by its members. In contrast, the term ‘network’ as I understand it rather describes certain ties – that is,

relations between people, whether strong or weak (see, e.g., Granovetter 1973; Stegbauer 2008) – which may be emotionally charged as discrete relationships, but are not interpreted by its members as a community with shared norms or goals.<sup>6</sup>

My own field of research is Web-based Christian discussion boards in the German language. In contrast to research which emphasizes the increasing importance of network approaches for researching online social forms, my empirical data indicate that this field can be grasped well in terms of online religious communities.

#### **4 “...Just Like Between Siblings”: Users’ Perspectives on Online Communities**

In the following I will refer to data from an empirical research project, conducted between 2010 and 2014, that focused on the users of Web-based Christian discussion boards in the German language and based in Germany, Austria or Switzerland. The boards were nominally dedicated to either the Catholic Church or a Protestant denomination, but in fact exhibited a broad range of internal variation in their religious orientation. They were hosted by private persons, small associations or church-related enterprises (e.g., publishing houses), but not by the nationally recognized churches. The vast majority of boards are visible to everyone, but registration is often required in order to take part in the online discussions. Their content is pre-structured in several thematic subsections, with at least one devoted to religion-related matters and one to non-religion-related discussions. In most cases, however, one will find a far more differentiated structure. Within these subsections, the threads are listed based on the time of their most recent post.

Within the research project as a whole, I analyzed the boards’ technical and media characteristics, especially with regard to modes of participation and their appropriation. A random sample of threads was also analyzed. But in keeping with the theoretical approaches outlined above, I argue that it is crucial to take the users’ perspectives into account when focusing on the question of online religious communities. Do they feel they share norms and values, a common history and common goals with their fellow users? Do they feel like they are part of a community online? To what degree, according to the users, are these communities promoted or restrained by the boards’ media characteristics? And what importance do these communities have for the overall religious activities and embedding of the boards’ users, especially in comparison to their offline affiliations?

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<sup>6</sup> I have elaborated on this elsewhere (see Neumaier 2016, 240–264).

The data used in the following are basically twofold: the first set consists of a quantitative survey with 842 participants,<sup>7</sup> among whom 450 used Web-based discussion boards at least frequently and answered the question set on online community and, therefore, serve as the sample for the purposes of this article. Qualitative interviews with 34 of the users comprise the second data set. These interviews were conducted, transcribed and analyzed in accordance with grounded theory and its respective three-step coding procedure (see Strauss & Corbin 1996). The survey questionnaire as well as the interviews focused on several topics of Internet use for religious purposes, including the users' perception of whether an online community existed on the discussion boards they frequently visited, how it could be characterized, and how important it was for their online use. Regarding the interviews, the analysis was not limited to the parts specifically asking about friendships and communities online, but included the entire interviews, especially with respect to questions of social forms.

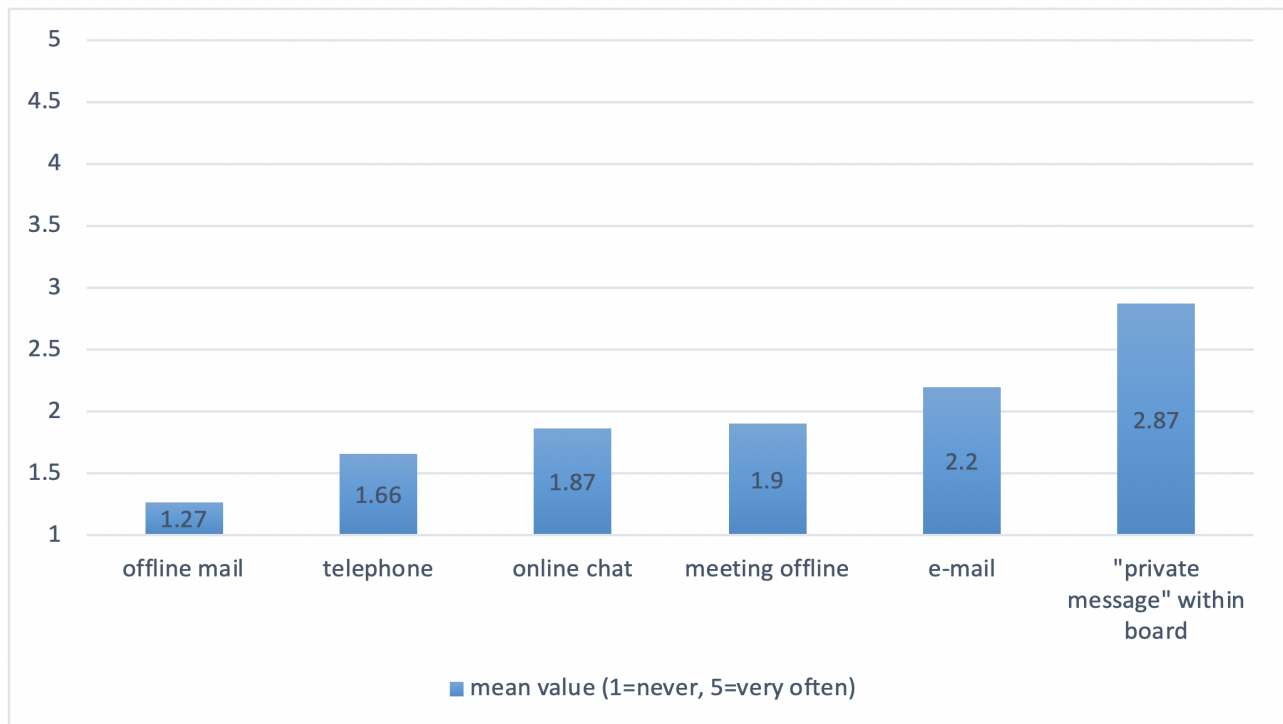
#### 4.1 Findings from the quantitative survey

Within the quantitative survey, two sections of items seem to be relevant for these investigations: contacts to other users, on the one hand, and attitudes toward friendship and online communities on the other. Regarding contacts to other users, survey participants were asked to describe the frequency of interaction with other users outside the online discussion board.

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<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that the participants were self-selected, so the findings have to be interpreted with caution and can only give a preliminary insight into the overall field of discussion board users.

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*Figure 1: Frequency of Interaction with Other Users Outside the Board Itself*

On a scale from 1 (never) to 5 (very often), 28% indicate that they had contact via private message often or very often, and another 37% at least occasionally (see also overall mean values in fig. 1). When it comes to e-mail or chat, 12% and 14%, respectively, communicated in this way very often or often, and another 27% and 11%, respectively, did so occasionally. Regarding non-digital means of communication with people met online, 7% have telephoned or met one another personally very often or often, while 13% percent have occasionally telephoned and 20% have met each other occasionally. Used least are traditional letters: 2% have written to other users often or very often, 5% occasionally.

On the basis of these results, we can distinguish modes of contact that stay within the realm of digital media and those that reach beyond. One might expect that the migration of interaction to other digital ways of communication would be closer at hand, and indeed 65% use the private messaging function within the board itself, and nearly 40 percent e-mail at least occasionally. On the other hand, people very rarely communicate via posted letters, which is most likely part of the general trend of decreasing importance of posted letters for frequent and everyday personal contact. Reflecting a similar trend, telephone calls are the second least popular mode of interaction outside the board itself. This indeed seems to indicate a descending order of mediated contact, ranging from staying within digital media to migrating to ‘offline communication’. However, there is a striking

counterexample: 27% have met other users in person at least occasionally, while slightly fewer users (25%) join in Web-based chat rooms also occasionally. While both modes of communication foster simultaneous and direct exchange, face-to-face meetings still seem to be more popular or – more precisely and probably even more surprisingly – are more often realized. Obviously, people are willing to accept the additional costs of leaving the digital environment, and they quite clearly seem to prefer personal meetings to other, non-personal ways of communicating offline. Face-to-face meetings therefore still appear to be highly attractive and are comparatively more frequently enacted.

Personal relationships are one aspect – and sometimes an integral part – of community building in online environments, as they can be the basis for stable and long-lasting bonds. In some of the classical conceptions, they even count as a necessary condition. On the other hand, they are hardly sufficient conditions, neither in classical nor in modern approaches to community. This is especially true if, as researchers, we adhere to approaches like that of ‘symbolic communities’, in which case we have to take individual perspectives and attitudes on the particular social form into account. To do so, another set of quantitative data derived from the survey can give further insight, as it specifically asked for the users’ perception of community. The survey items were derived from a model of community elaborated in an earlier work (see Neumaier 2016, 248–52). The model consists of different dimensions of community as outlined above – locality, mutual interaction and a feeling of belonging together – all of which are crucial categories within existing theoretical concepts of community. The respective survey items can be related to these dimensions and test different aspects and intensities of the items. Besides asking to what degree the discussion board is perceived as a familiar locality and the frequency of helping one another, several survey items are directed at a shared sense of trust, sympathy and commonality, specifically asking about the following: a shared history, insider knowledge, a sense of community, established friendships, shared opinions, the feeling of being understood online (better than offline), a feeling of honesty toward each other, a shared dedication to common goals, basically liking the other users, looking forward to being online, being emotionally involved in other users’ stories, having taken part in conflictual debating, planning to use the forum for a long time, and the urge to notify the other users if one is going to be absent for a long period of time (see fig. 2).

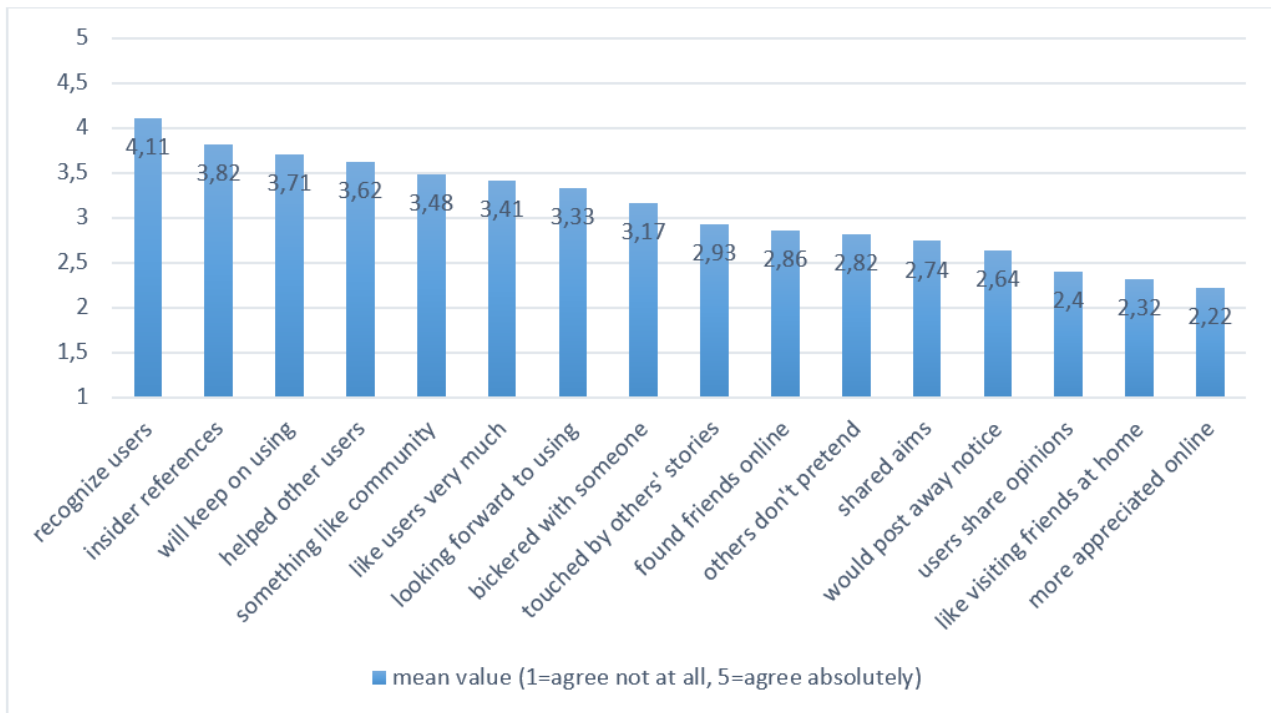


Figure 2: Agreement with Dimensions of Community in Online Discussion Board Use

The answers show that the highest (arithmetic) average by far (4.11 of 5) is achieved in the item “I ‘recognize’ other users, e.g., I remember their stories and/or know their opinions.” This indicates that users see their fellow users as individual with attitudes and a history, and can relate these aspects to those specific persons, probably by remembering their nicknames or avatars. Other items with a high average point to an (actual or planned) long-lasting activity online: people anticipate continuing to use the online board into the distant future (3.71) and indicate that they have ‘insider knowledge’ (3.82), which is only gained by frequent participation. Perhaps surprisingly, the statement “I have already helped other users” generates the next highest value. It is not specified whether this refers to giving advice, praying for each other, donating money to users or their parishes in need, or engaging in offline activities, but as the online observations show, all of these activities have indeed occurred within an online board. The mean value of 3.62 is clearly above average here, and only 7% of users state that they have never helped their fellow users in any way. The survey items with the lowest agreement rating were those referring to shared opinions and goals (2.40, 2.74) and the feeling of being understood better online than offline (2.22). This may be interpreted as indicative of a sense of belonging together, which derives more from a shared (communicative) history and mutual support than from shared convictions, be they religious or otherwise. The conclusion is somewhat counterintuitive: knowing and helping one another and being together for a long time, but not necessarily sharing opinions and values, are characteristics of



classic forms of community such as the *Dorfgemeinschaft* mentioned above, which is based on long-standing forms of living together. However, this pattern certainly does not hold for those forms of community that coalesce around the individual choices of groups of like-minded people, such as translocal, temporary communities and especially, as one might expect, religious communities.

In this context it should also be pointed out that the means are remarkably high (none lower than 2.22/5), and – with three exceptions – fewer than a quarter of the participants stated that these statements were not true for them at all. Despite the Internet often being seen as an impersonal medium and therefore suitable for creating networks but not for the emergence of communities, the respondents clearly feel connected in one way or another.

## 4.2 Findings from the qualitative interviews

The analysis of the quantitative data also prompts some crucial questions: What broader picture can be painted of online religious communities based on the survey data? What is the significance of the relationships between individual users with regard to community? And what role does religion play as a factor in the development of a community? We addressed these questions with qualitative interviews, asking the interviewees, among other questions, whether they perceived something comparable to a community on their preferred religious Web board. The analyses of their elaborations led to three types of perceived community, which will be presented in the following. Their original German names consist of *in vivo* codes, that is, keywords which originated in the interviews and were identified as particularly appropriate or relevant by the interviewer. Translated into English, the three types can be referred to as ‘siblings in faith’, ‘board family’ and ‘combat zone’.

The first type, ‘siblings in faith’, is characterized by harmonious interactions, shared religious beliefs, and mutual support and encouragement in faith-related issues. Moritz tells me with regard to the mutual support he experienced and observed online:

Oh yes, there are really those people with unfortunate fates [...] who also need the support of brothers and sisters, and in this regard I think – well, I appreciate it very much, because I think [the website] as a whole is AMAZINGLY respectable. (Moritz)<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> All given names are pseudonyms chosen by the author of the study. Quotes have been translated from the German and have been rendered as verbatim as possible, with only small interjections of the interviewer (such as ‘yes’ or ‘mh’) being deleted. For the purpose of this article, transcription signs were reduced as much as possible. Still included are capital letters for strongly emphasized words and dashes if the speaker stopped him- or herself in the middle of a thought and started again in a different way.

Being able to help one another through actions and spiritual support is one of the main advantages of using the online board, and the users very much appreciate it for this. Additionally, even though Moritz himself is not a Christian, he naturally refers to the other users as ‘brothers and sisters’ in the Christian sense of the term. Christianity here serves as an overarching reference to which everybody can and does relate as a basis for relationships and support.

With regard to the ‘siblings in faith’, the board users can be characterized by numerous individual relationships, but this in and of itself does not form a community. The users do not refer to a community of board users, but understand the individual relationships as well as the board itself as being only part of a larger religious community, that is, the Christian community. This understanding not only proves to be a common concept in many religious traditions, including Christian ones, but regarding theories of communities, it also clearly reminds one of Anderson’s ‘imagined communities’. In both cases, people feel that they are a small part of a greater whole, even though they do not – and never will – know all other members of the respective community.

The second type, the ‘board family’, shares the principle of generally harmonious interactions. Unlike the ‘siblings of faith’, however, these interactions can be a bit more discussion oriented, as people in those communities are more heterogeneous regarding their worldviews and religious orientations. They understand themselves more as a family, which, in their eyes, includes cohesion in the face of external attacks, but with a bit of internal quarrelling as well.

And I think it’s a nice thing that you recognize, if [there are] two of them who actually have totally contrasting worldviews and actually can’t get along with each other, if then a new user enters the board and insults one of them [narrates an example], the users who normally fight with each other then join forces against the other, eh? According to the rule “I’m allowed to do that, I may [laughs], I may give him a hard time, but if somebody external is approaching [...], we stick together somehow!”  
(Sarah)

Users characterize this kind of community as a family precisely for this reason:

And then, with [the board], well, there they find some like-minded people, at least in parts that’s always the case. And there are these opposing views, and most people handle that very well, I think. That you argue with each other, well, OK, I mean I have a family, that’s just like between siblings.  
(Cornelia)

Therefore, the basis for perceiving themselves as a community in this case does not lie in an overall feeling of being like-minded, and it does not refer to an overarching imagined community of shared norms and attitudes. Rather, the self-conception as a community is mainly based on a shared history of users and their interactions on the Internet board. Consequently, and in contrast to the ‘siblings in

faith', the community in this case can be seen in the online board itself and its users. There is no reference to greater entities (e.g., a global religious community), or at least this does not appear to be important for the users' perception of this community. This, ultimately, resembles quite traditional concepts of community, in particular those that are based on long-lasting cohabitation, be it because of kinship or because of residential proximity.

The third type is, in a nutshell, the 'combat zone'. Using online boards in this case serves the purpose of discussing religion in depth and on an intellectual level regarding, for example, theological, juridical or philosophical questions related to religion. This is not to suggest that the respective users are critical of or antagonistic toward religion in general; in fact, they are often profoundly religious, but their personal religiosity is not at the core of their online use. Rather, they are looking for what they would describe as a highly sophisticated conversation about the backgrounds and contexts of their personal beliefs. They want to improve their knowledge of religion, and therefore are looking not for harmonious contacts, but for thoughtful, skilled conversationalists.

If incorrect or unproven statements are posted online, what I like very much on [the board] is that then immediately a lot of further questions are asked, and proof is called for, or counterstatements are given, very elaborated, eh. Thus, I also had to – it's always a bit EMBARRASSING, but also instructive, if you yourself in a discussion present as a fact something that you just know from hearsay, and then you get it back, slapped in your face, because in fact, it's not true, or only half – well, one has learned something, hasn't one? (Johannes)

While the metaphor of the 'combat zone' is quite conflict-oriented (and other users refer to metaphors of physical fighting), yet others refer to metaphors from the field of gaming (e.g., chess) and other more playful ways of competing.

This description may not immediately evoke associations of community. Nonetheless, users not only appreciate their fellow users and the online board as a whole and rely on it for reasons of personal development, but they also have respect and sympathy for their conversation partners online and get to know their stories, attitudes and backgrounds very well. Herbert, an atheist user of a Catholic board, tells me:

The interesting people were the ones engaged in church or religiously, on the one hand, because one could argue with them, and on the other hand, because I realized very quickly that they are not fools. [...] Well, people with good arguments with, with interesting thoughts – and that is, what, what I realized at this moment, what actually shapes my existence on the board: I am there to learn. (Herbert)

These ‘combat zones’ and ‘chess players’ therefore form a kind of community as the term is defined by most of the current approaches for the present times (e.g., Hitzler, 2008). They make a fluid, temporal community whose members gather for a specific purpose. This purpose may be primarily self-centered (in this case: debate with other users in order to be entertained, improve individual knowledge, and eventually become an increasingly independent believer), but for the time being, quite a stable community emerges around these needs.<sup>9</sup>

With regard to the three sets of characteristics developed earlier, it is finally important to mention that there is evidence of qualities from all three categories of components of a community. The action-related components can be found easily: users not only give answers and advice, but also contact one another if they feel that someone’s posts sound desperate and pray for each other or donate money in times of need. Some become godparents for other users’ children, and there have even been marriages that started on the discussion board. These aspects can be found in all of the three types mentioned above, although they may be more common within the ‘siblings of faith’ and the ‘board family’.

Idea-related properties can be found as well. As some quotes have already shown, users share norms and values, and indicate the borders of a community. With regard to the three types of community depicted above, though, these norms, borders, shared ideas, and so forth refer to different entities, depending on a) whether the community’s border is congruent with the board itself and b) the significance of religion for the formation of the community. Thus, they can refer to an overarching religious community, as is the case with the ‘siblings in faith’, or to the board itself, as in the case of the ‘board family’.

Within the online context, the physical properties of a community may be most at stake, but several aspects from the findings would appear to offset this danger and therefore are worth mentioning here. First, there are in fact offline meetings of board users of several boards, which in some cases even take place regularly and/or extend over several days. While these are only attended by a core group of users, they can still lead to a general feeling of community among a larger group of users. Second, users interpret the board in terms of a physical place with spatial properties. Terms like ‘going online’, ‘arriving at the board’, and ‘being present at the board’ point to this understanding. Drawing on spatial approaches (e.g., Löw 2001), it can be argued that these interpretations are essential for understanding the spatial qualities of a place (Löw 2001; see also

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<sup>9</sup> From a religious studies point of view, there is a certain correlation of community type with the users’ religious affiliation that may be of interest. Based on an analysis of the boards’ topics as well as the styles of communication, it is mainly Catholic, male-dominated boards that show characteristics of the ‘combat zone’ type of community, while the Protestant and Evangelical boards tend to show signs of the first two types. As I have elaborated elsewhere (Neumaier 2016), this – perhaps unexpected – correlation can be explained if we look at the role of the boards in relation to their users’ offline affiliations and the specific motives for board use that go along with those affiliations.

Neumaier 2016b). Finally, not unlike other places of religion-related gathering (e.g., parish halls), discussion boards are experienced as reliable places for meeting people, with stable properties for interaction and communication, which again converges with Löw's theoretical considerations.

## 5 Conclusion and Discussion

In sum, the quantitative survey shows, on the one hand, the emergence of social relations on Christian Web boards. On the other hand, it depicts a very classical type of local community which is based on a shared history and mutual support, and less on shared worldviews and values. The qualitative research extends and elaborates these findings into three types of community that differ in the degree of harmonious or conflict-oriented interaction, the point of reference for the perceived community, and the role of religion in it. This allows further conclusions to be drawn.

First, it became clear that even in the context of one specific media platform – in this case, online discussion boards – different kinds of communities emerge. Some of them resemble rather classical types similar to those depicted by Tönnies and Weber, while others mirror more contemporary developments. And although the latter may in fact be communities of choice as opposed to communities of birth (i.e., being born into a certain family or village in the nineteenth century), and can be left if users feel the urge to do so, they do not resemble Hepp's or Hitzler's posttraditional or deterritorial communities in general. Examples from the interviews show that at least a core group of users takes part in an online board over years, and that their perception of experiencing a community can be rooted in a long, shared history and in knowing the background stories of other users. This also indicates that while online communities are obviously not detached from broader trends in society, their emergence does not necessarily result in the general replacement of older forms of communities; in fact, the online communities may actually emulate and perpetuate the older forms. Second, it has to be noted that all these kinds of communities share basic components that sociologists would identify as properties of a community. They may play out in different ways, but nonetheless characterize every type elaborated above.

Both aspects underline the fact that there is no unidirectional or even teleological development within the field of online religious social forms. Online platforms like Web boards may lead to the emergence of networks, but they certainly also allow communities to form. Regarding the actual type of community, the needs and interests of users are decisive; users establish or find a respective community arising from the opportunities that social media provide. Finally, the emerging communities prove that Web boards are able to substitute for a feature of offline religions that is important to many of the Christian users.

Some limitations still have to be addressed. In this study, only users of Web boards were taken into account. It seems likely that research on platforms with other media characteristics (e.g., less text-based ones, or those with more fluid user groups) may lead to quite different findings. Also, I included a discussion of neither the platforms themselves nor the users' actual use of them. Based on my theoretical considerations, I have instead focused on the users' interpretations regarding whether they experienced a community or not. I might add, though, that in the larger context of the study I also visited the boards regularly and analyzed their media characteristics as well as styles of use. These analyses point to a convergence of the users' experiences and actual modes of communication and interaction within the specific boards they approach. However, these findings, as well as the relation of online communities to the users' offline affiliations, are discussed elsewhere (Neumaier 2016).

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### **Biography**

Dr. ANNA NEUMAIER is a postdoctoral researcher at the Institute for Religious Studies at the University of Bremen, Germany. Her PhD thesis (published 2014) investigated the conditions, modes and consequences of religious Internet use among Christians from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. Her areas of research and teaching are transformations of contemporary religion and religiosity, with a particular focus on religion and new media, religious community, religious authority, theories of secularization and religious pluralization, interreligious dialogue and qualitative research on religion.

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