Article

Religion Online: Transformations and Future Directions

April 7, 2024

How the Internet has shaped religious thought, reach, and practice

Beginning in 2010, the Center for Religion and Media at New York University (NYU) established a two-part, multiyear initiative to explore how digital technology shapes religious knowledge and forms of practice. The drive to learn more about this domain came out of the recognition that the Internet was now bigger than ever and touching almost every aspect of life, even those considered sacred and personal in some cultures. As digital technology expanded the experience and reach of religious communities and their social networks across vast territorial spaces has generated new symbols and signifiers and new social networks. The implications of these distinct but interrelated changes needed to be better understood.

Two main areas of inquiry were the focus of the two-day “Transforming Knowledge and Practice” workshop:

- How are digital technologies transforming and challenging religious practice across national and cultural boundaries?
- How is online commentary/journalism transforming knowledge about religion and its

implications for international politics, diplomacy and human rights?

Digital Religion: Transforming Knowledge and Practice (March 25-26, 2010)



Source: Kelly via Pexels.

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Over two days, several events explored how technology has changed the landscape of faith and religion.

- **"Digital Challenges by and for Religious Life":** This session explored the questions: "*How is religious life challenged through digital capabilities? How can understandings of digital religion take into account the ways that digital practices intersect with the everyday lives of those who are not necessarily connected in either wired or wireless form? How is the digital understood to function 'religiously'?*" Presenters for this session included Ramesh Srinivasan (University of California, Los Angeles), Brigitte Sion (NYU), Gabriella Coleman (NYU), Elizabeth Castelli (Barnard College, chair of Religious Studies), and Patsy Spyer (Leiden/NYU Global Fellow). Faye Ginsburg of NYU CRM served as the moderator.
- **"Digital Stories, Religion, and Human Rights Activism":** This session included a screening of *Burma VJ* followed by a Q&A about the film.
- **"Witnessing, Reporting, and Digital Mediation of Religious Conflict: Challenges for Human Rights":** This roundtable discussion explored the following questions: "*How has religious conflict and persecution been changed, exacerbated, or eased, through the use of digital technologies among the protagonists? How have crowdsourcing and citizen journalism changed aspects of coverage of political and religious life? How have digital media transformed the politics of human rights organizations?*" This roundtable was

moderated by Julie Sulc of Pew Charitable Trusts and included the following discussants: Annabelle Sreberny (School of Oriental and African Studies, London), Sam Gregory (Witness, Program Director), Peter Manseau (Writer; PhD candidate, Georgetown), and Robbie Barnett (Columbia University).

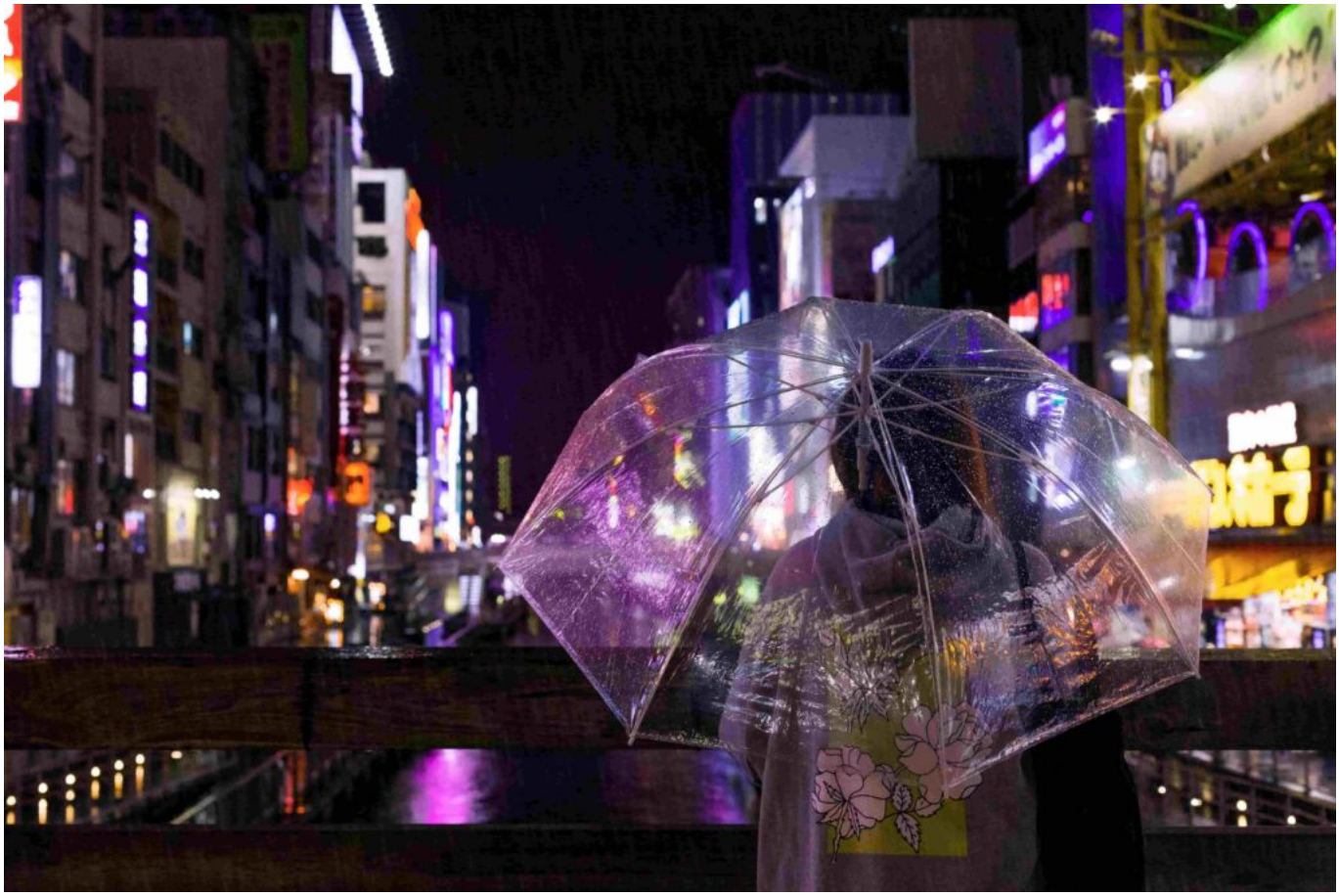
- **"Religious Practice Digitally Transformed"**: *"How have new media influenced aspects of life and practice across transnational diasporas of religious people? How do the religious actively integrate the digital into practice or cosmology? How does this vary across national boundaries to unite or drive apart communities?"* These were the organizing questions at the center of this discussion. Participants included: Heidi Campbell (Texas A&M University), Kristin Sands (Sarah Lawrence College), Oren Golan (NYU CRM), Lynn Schofield Clark (University of Denver), Gregory Grieve (University of California, Greensboro), and Rachel Wagner (Ithaca College). NYU CRM's Erica Robles served as the discussion moderator.
- **"Writing on Religion in an Online World"**: Moderated by NYU's Brooke Kroeger, the central questions of this panel were: *"How have writers and activists incorporated digital practices into their own writing about and treatment of religious life and its varied spiritualities and politics? What specific challenges does religion present for storytelling? How do journalism and storytelling about religion fit into the world of blogging and online writing? How can humanities-driven academic environments, where you find programs like Religious Studies and Centers for Religion and Media, engage this digital world?"* The following experts engaged in this discussion: Jeff Sharlet (assistant professor, Dartmouth College; writer and associate editor for *The Revealer* and *Killing the Buddha*); Debra Mason (director, Center on Religion and the Professions, University of Missouri); Peter Manseau (writer, editor at *Killing the Buddha*); Evan Derkasc (editor at Religion Dispatches) Haroon Moghul (Columbia and NYU); and Gordon Knox (director, Arizona State University Art Museum).
- **"Gathering Threads, Future Agendas: Reports from Workshop Commentators"**: This

final session of the workshop enabled scholars to summarize and comment on the proceedings. Led by Angela Zito, the discussion also included Diane Winston (Knight Chair of Journalism, University of Southern California) and Jeremy Stolow (Concordia University; Director Deus in Machina Project).

Watch the recordings

See the schedule

Religion in the Digital Age II: Mediating "The Human" in a Globalizing Asia (September 27-28, 2013)



Source: Andrey Grushnikov via Pexels

This workshop explored media representations of "the human" in China, Japan, Korea,

Taiwan, India, Burma, Cambodia, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia, and other Asian countries. The guiding questions of the two-day workshop were as follows:

- *"What styles of personhood, of humanity, are encouraged in regimes of mediation through religious practice and training? What contribution do the digital and new media forms make to such disciplines? (including social media, DVD, video, broadcast, etc.)?"*
- *"What roles do religion and digital media play in local political movements? How do digital forms amplify religious influence in volatile political contexts, where the capacity of new technologies renders these processes visible and audible on the political stage? How is religious conflict changed, exacerbated, or eased, through the use of digital technologies?"*
- *"How do digital media transform advocacy and ethics in an era when cell phone uploads can reveal human rights violations while also at times putting vulnerable religious subjects at risk?"*
- *"In countries where discussing politics and religion is discouraged and could lead to arrest for sedition (such as Malaysia, for example, or China) how can citizens use video media to influence the social and political conversation? What risks do citizen journalists face, particularly in the absence of a critical mass that might afford them some protection through anonymity?"*
- *"How are questions of social justice, ethics, and morality taken up/reframed/ introduced by participants who have become involved as members of religious groups, or by people reacting against organized religions?"*
- *"Conversely, how does the global visibility of media distort the recognition and representation of religious organizations and their particular ways of operating in localities? What sorts of feedback loops become engaged and influence 'live' performances on the ground by embodied actors?"*
- *"How is knowledge about religion and its implications for international politics, diplomacy*

and human rights being transformed via online commentary, citizen journalism, and the blogosphere, as well as in the circulation of film and video that offer alternative narratives to hegemonic understandings? Another way of asking this question is to frame it in terms of the relationship of legacy forms of media work and digital technologies and online spaces."

Watch the recordings

Learn about the presenters

Read the presentation abstracts