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The Intersection of Religion and Mobile Technology

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INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of mobile technology throughout society has influenced many aspects of contemporary life, including religious practice. While much scholarship is focused on religious mobile applications (apps), earlier scholars also explored how different religious groups adopted, negotiated, or rejected mobile technology according to their core values and beliefs. Research on the intersection of mobile technology and religion falls under studies of "digital religion," which seeks to understand the complex relationship between digital technology and religion (Campbell, Altenhofen, Bellar, & Cho, 2014). Broad themes explored within digital religion over the last 20 years include religious authority, identity, community, and authenticity (Campbell et al., 2014). These research themes help reveal the ways religious individuals and communities engage with both mobile technologies and digital culture as a whole.

This article is divided into three sections. First, a brief background on studies of mobile technology and digital religion provides necessary context for understanding the history and trajectory of religion and mobile studies. Next, three key areas of religion and mobile media research are explicated: how religious individuals and communities negotiate mobile media use, the ways in which religious mobile apps are being designed and used for religious practice, and the commodification of religion through mobile media. Finally, the article concludes with a discussion of emerging trends within mobile media and religion, which suggests future research opportunities.

BACKGROUND

Mobile media have been described as "unanchored communication" which takes place "during transition" (S. Campbell, 2013, p. 10). It is important, however, to distinguish between laptop devices and mobile devices. While laptops can move from place-to-place, the proper infrastructures, from physical space to wireless internet connections, are required for use. Mobile devices, however, can be used anytime, anywhere. Additionally, the diffusion of mobile devices throughout the developed world raises concerns and inquiries about their social and cultural impacts (Smith, 2013), such as the positive and negative impacts mobile technology can have on religious communities.

In the US and other developing countries, mobile phone penetration has almost reached saturation point and smartphone adoption is increasing rapidly ("2 billion consumers", 2014). Recent surveys also provide a clearer picture of mobile app use. Neilson (2015) found apps account for 89% of mobile phone usage, while 11% can be attributed to the mobile web. In the US, the average smartphone user has approximately 28 apps

downloaded on their devices and has used 11 of those apps within the last month (Google, 2015).

While religious mobile use is not reflected in these numbers, other studies point to religious engagement through mobile technology. For example, religious engagement online has been well documented since the 1980s (Campbell, 2010). Sixty-four percent of Americans reported searching for religious information or engaging in religious practice online (Hoover, Clark, & Rainie, 2004). The Barna Group reported that one in four Christians uses an e-reader or other mobile device for reading the Bible (2013). That same report showed that pastors' use of mobile technology to read and study the Bible tripled in two years to 44% (Barna, 2013). While it is clear mobile technology is being used for religious purposes, the impact this mobile technology use is having on religious users and communities is underresearched.

Numbers on the diffusion of mobile technology in general, and in religious contexts, highlight the need for careful study of the ways in which these technologies influence religion and how religious users engage mobile technology. This brief review of statics implies the intersection of religion and technology follows similar patterns as mainstream adoption and use. Yet in their work digital religion scholars emphasize mediating factors such as specific beliefs, core values, and ritual practices that contribute to unique forms of engagement (Campbell, 2010). Therefore, digital religion seeks to understand these unique engagements, to illuminate the broader relationship between technology and religion as a whole.

Digital Religion

Digital religion is defined as a "framework for articulating the evolution of religious practices online which are linked to online and offline contexts simultaneously" (H. Campbell, 2013, p. 1) Research on mobile technology and religion is a subfield of digital religion in that: a) mobile technologies are providing a new way for prac-

ticing religion; and b) those religious practices happen concurrently in multiple online/mobile/offline contexts While early studies of religion and media contextualized the online and offline as separate spaces, digital religion argues for a "third space" in which the two are blurred (Hoover & Echchaibi, 2012). Mobile users and religious contexts occupy these two spaces simultaneously in everyday life.

Studies on religion and the internet began two decades ago (for more detailed accounts see additional reading suggestions). Religious authority, community, identity, and authenticity have been major themes within digital religion (see Campbell et al., 2014). The development of the field can be described as flowing through four waves: a) a focus on describing new opportunities online spaces provide for religious practice and the potential impact technology has on religious understanding (H. Campbell, 2013b, p. 8); b) an exploration of technologies and users practicing and engaging religion in online spaces through questions about religious identity, authenticity, and practice (H. Campbell, 2013b, p. 8); c) theoretical and interpretive research on how the "embeddedness" of the internet in everyday life influences religious digital practice" (H. Campbell, 2013b, p. 9-10); and d) a focus on new methodological modes, as well as development of typologies and categorizations for interpretive purposes (Campbell & Lövheim, 2011, p. 1092). Mobile technologies are a focus within this fourth and current wave.

KEY THEMES IN RELIGION AND MOBILE TECHNOLOGY

This section discusses the latest research in three key areas of religion and mobile technology studies: religious communities and individual engagement with mobile technology; the design, development, and use of religious mobile apps; and the commodification of religion related to mobile technology. Each section provides a broad overview of the current and research available pro-

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