Network Sociality and Religion in the Digital Age

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# Abstract

The study of religion through a community-building paradigm has dominated sociology of religion, but does not account for changes to sociality and social spaces in the digital era which have influenced the ways individuals express their religiosity. A network sociality paradigm better explains increasingly personal and individualised approaches to religiosity in a contemporary social setting because of the de-hierarchized nature of computer mediated communication. Approaching religion, and digital religion through the lens of mediatised network sociality reveals the development of new groups and identities using the internet as an accessible translocal socio-cultural space.

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# Introduction: Life with the internet

Plurality and individualism within the contemporary religious situation are in part a product of the secularisation processes which changed religious authority in the modern period. The process of social secularisation following the Protestant Reformation broke the religious monopoly in the Western public sphere of life and allowed for institutions including media, politics and the economy to operate independently. With religious institutions no longer in control of how individuals encountered and engaged with religion individuals increasingly exercised the option to make autonomous choices about religious pursuits. Taking on Émile Durkheim’s definition of religion as a framework related to a “unified set of beliefs and practices, related to sacred things… which unite into one single moral community… all those who adhere to them,”[[1]](#footnote-1) religion forms communal sociality based on a personal sense of belonging. This reflects the tendency to combine the practice of religion with that of community formation. Traditionally this focus on community has been associated with face-to-face interactions between a group of individuals who shared elements of worldview and practice. Sociality in the pre-digital era was oriented towards the maintenance of the institutional communal identity instead of purely individual interests. However, digital media, and the influx of new technological affordances have made possible almost instant communication across great distance, creating a global communicative super space with ease of access.

Digital media became the infrastructure for a new social space on the internet through mediatisation[[2]](#footnote-2), which normalised the use of media as an indispensable component of communication between individuals. Digital habits created a new role for media, enabling and defining the field of possible experiences by producing a space for information.[[3]](#footnote-3) The normalisation of media into our daily lives explains changes in the forms of interactions taking primacy in contemporary social relationships. The universalisation of mobile technology and expansion of web search paired ability to participate in communication and information building on a global scale has made reliance on media, like secularisation, a modern cultural process which impacts the development of religions, and religious experience. [[4]](#footnote-4) If secularisation is an indispensable framework for understanding changes to sociality in the contemporary religious situation, then so too is digital mediatisation.

The rise of digital technology and infrastructure increased independent access to religious and non-religious material and relationships online, and has embedded our social interactions into media through a system of media logic[[5]](#footnote-5). These factors work alongside other processes of modernisation in society to force religion into self-transformation to suit media logic, which in turn facilitates the granular marketing of media logic through religion.[[6]](#footnote-6) These changes have been an impetus for the rise of individualised religion, but have not signalled the end of religious communitisation, instead technological affordances of digital media have fostered new forms of networked communitisations.

This paper approaches the analysis of religious communitisation[[7]](#footnote-7) through the lens of networking, as a strategic differentiation from the study of traditional communities. In the first and second chapters, I analyse methods of studying religion in both traditional community and network sociality paradigms. I compare the ability of networks to foster group connectivity by creating a stream of reciprocal instrumental relationships between individuals that may overlap, and intertwine to serve one’s needs will be compared to the undifferentiated social relations within traditional communities.[[8]](#footnote-8) This paper further suggests that sociality in the digital age relies on media and network sociality to create systems of reciprocal relationships at a translocal level. Because of this, a networking lens can be applied to the intrarelationships between Jewish diaspora communities and individuals within those communities. Using the history of Jewish diaspora as an example of premodern religious networking, this paper focuses on the ways the religion has adapted to a digital space.[[9]](#footnote-9) Increased communication in the diaspora has facilitated stronger social bonds within and between groups through mediated communication, showing that sociality is possible with instrumental relationships based on the impartation of religious worldview and ideology through the media environment.

The advent of Web 2.0[[10]](#footnote-10) and graphical user interfaces in convergence with the spread of affordable personal digital technologies have inserted digital and social media engagement into social participatory behaviours. The ubiquitous relationship that has developed between social communication and the experience of being “always on” in one’s connection to social networks through digital media have changed the experience of cohesion by allowing for connection without physical presence.[[11]](#footnote-11) Whereas connections once relied upon face to face contact, written communications, or on being available, and at the location of a telephone, todays digital technology, including smartphones enable effortless, continual and unimpeded connection. Andreas Hepp notes that in the digital era, physical territoriality is no longer the constitutive feature of a community; In contrast to the pre-digital era, Hepp frames the digital era as involving broader and more open communicative fields made possible by the social space provided by the internet in which individuals may foster relationships and interactions no matter where they are in physical space.[[12]](#footnote-12)

# Religion as Community

Community as the basic form of social connectedness serves as the basis for the clear majority of the history of religious studies. This chapter will address the pre-digital dominance of the traditional community paradigm, and the potential for sociality to develop outside of the stability and locality of the community paradigm. Approaching the community paradigm through a sociological lens in this chapter I problematize the practicality of the community paradigm for sociality on a global scale through digital media. The concept of religion as a community stems from Durkheim’s definition of religion as a “unified system of beliefs and practices” which serve to “unite a single moral community,” the idea of a community with a system of undifferentiated mutual support and shared resources became the paramount way to socialise.[[13]](#footnote-13) Religious groups like these focussed on internally oriented cohesion, manifest through the social coercion and oriented these collectivities towards maintaining homogeneity of members.[[14]](#footnote-14) Each member the religious community was informed of, and able to practice religion through the auspices of institutions which controlled what information was accessible. These members were also expected to participate in a social support system that connected individuals based on belonging to the religious community. As social and technological progress empowered individuals by personalising almost instant communication, the desire for connectedness began to supersede the community model. Unlike in communities, social connections oriented towards individual and personal goals can create both support and norms whist allowing for looser relationships that are only activated purposively. The move towards individual priorities in relationships was fostered by the ease of access that mobile technological affordances created for communication and exchange at greater speeds and distances which meant that religiosity could be more easily self-constructed by individuals.[[15]](#footnote-15)

## Impact of the Sociology of Religion

Sociological studies of religion often focus on the role of the community as a unit in the broader social sphere. The emphasis on community as a basic unit of religious sociality was demonstrated further in Durkheim’s view that religion could not be a purely individual experience because it was a manifestation of society as a “higher moral power from which he [the worshipper] derives his best self,”[[16]](#footnote-16) which indicates participation in the creation of religiosity, and the impact of the religious community on identity. The norms and ideals that are imparted in institutional religion are preserved as social facts which impact group cohesion.[[17]](#footnote-17) In this way, the power of religion is created by the “collective life that an individual has learned to idealise,”[[18]](#footnote-18) manifesting as an ideal type representation of pre-modern local community. The sociological emphasis on how institutional religion controlled human consciousness, including for instance, Karl Marx’s conception of religion as a herd mentality, idealises stable identity and connections.[[19]](#footnote-19) In contrast, the Chicago School of sociology[[20]](#footnote-20) focussed on community as a model of “concern for public affairs and improvement of … life,” in the modern period, and as a unit for examining cohesive social behaviour.[[21]](#footnote-21) Community as the paramount unit to understand shared systems of behaviour, belief and norms for the sociological study of population dynamics supported the study of religious communities and congregations, but neglected the impact of individuals.

A more contemporary heritage of these scholars identifies the ethical communities of the past with the familiar mode of communal insurance against individual experience within the bounds of constructing social facts[[22]](#footnote-22). Yet this idea that social action was dependent on a sense of community to engage people in common activities and relies upon social intimacy and concern is challenged by technological developments which allow imagined relationships that maintain a community through reciprocal interactions between individuals.[[23]](#footnote-23) Community was conceived as a mode of humanising society by bringing people together in a public space, but as religion was increasingly privatised, this aspect of community cohesion which provided “psychological support, religious nourishment, and deep friendships”[[24]](#footnote-24) was redressed to individuals. Communities used psycho-therapeutic and social supports to social bonds, and construct a moral ideology to live by, and congregational communities continue to provide these things locally.[[25]](#footnote-25) Unlike social connections made by individuals, religious communities provided uniform support mandated by the institutions to all members.

## Global Connectivity

Globalisation changed the experience of community worldwide by providing new communication opportunities and the experience of social connection and interactions not based on face-to-face interactions between a tightly-knit geographically coherent group, allowing for an international flow of capital and information.[[26]](#footnote-26) This meant that new relationships were made through interactions between individuals at great distances. The expansion of worldwide economies corresponds with the change from building communities in local places into the formation of hybrid and translocal communities in digital space that did not rely on geography. This form of loose connectivity fostered interactions between individuals and groups based on similarities in beliefs, norms and interests. The internet as a space that is distinct from geographically bound places becomes a location and mode of interaction for new cooperative and collective actions.[[27]](#footnote-27) The internet as a space for personal connections between individuals empowers them in a way that community cannot, allowing the emergence of a participatory culture moulded by the affordances of technology for interaction which make it accessible, and allow almost instant communication. This shift has changed the everyday experience of sociality from a community, and infused mobile communication into the daily experience, giving agency to individuals outside of their institutional affiliations.

Trends associated with secularisation, including religious non-affiliation, and more individualised and privatised religion, led to the fear that lacking connections to a religious social network would destroy social support that the community structure provided. This illustrates how community membership is systematised as manifold belonging of individual intersubjectivities that form and foster relationships.[[28]](#footnote-28) With a view of community as not only a social form, but a social process of interactions modern sociality looks for forms of non-totalising group building, operating a logic of reciprocal relationships which gives individuals freedom to act for themselves, and for the good of the group as a social authenticator.[[29]](#footnote-29) The maintenance of a field of meaning and communication become a part of the creation of relationships instead of being given social norms and facts for membership, with “layered loyalties” that allow them to identify as a members of multiple communities and networks.[[30]](#footnote-30)

In Paul Numrich and Elfriede Wedam’s postulation of the restructuring of modern religion in America, secularisation has led to smaller congregations and more specialised interactions.[[31]](#footnote-31) Secularisation changed the political and social obligations to be a part of a religious community into a voluntary association. Religious institutions lost their coercive power to define boundaries for relationships, and were no longer perceived as a necessity for social participation.[[32]](#footnote-32) Instead of being obligated to participate in the support model of the community sociality has become personal, and open to the expanding personal opportunities for contact.[[33]](#footnote-33) Separating the concept of religious community from being tantamount to sociality allowed for the secular and for freedom of choice to become components of meaning making, and world building. This realm of sociality dominated by individual’s desires and drives towards instrumentalised relationships reflects the changing systems of meaning making which drive modern society.

Zygmunt Bauman has noted that the autonomy of individuals and personal experience in late modernity appears to undermine the security of identity that can be attributed to religious communities.[[34]](#footnote-34) The institutional control of access to the sacred mandated in much of the religious community paradigm has been challenged by new communication technologies which change the dynamic of access to the sacred and to sacred space. The expanding dynamic of individual participation in the construction of religious sociality transcends the geographic traditional community to facilitate cultural communities in a translocal space which foster a continued sense of solidarity. In the premodern period, religious communities maintained the spiritual well-being of members both by providing them access to and information about the sacred and also through fellowship which created an affectively warm, undifferentiated system of support and indirect benefits. The community social caring was patterned by the social facts which determined which behaviours were conducive to belonging.[[35]](#footnote-35) Contrastingly, when looking to fulfil “private and personal needs”[[36]](#footnote-36) solidarity becomes contingent on both social norms and reciprocal behaviours which serve needs through interaction.[[37]](#footnote-37) In this way the service of those personal needs can be transformed into social action, and specialised relationships of support.

## Tönnies Patterns of Sociality

The shifting pattern of sociality has been famously problematized by Ferdinand Tönnies in his dichotomisation of community (*Gemeinschaft)* and society (*Gesellschaft*) as modes of social grouping which master a cohesive system of relationships in the pre-digital era.[[38]](#footnote-38) Tönnies was concerned that public nature of relationships in society meant that they would only be united to serve some social purpose. He feared that individuals living independently alongside each other would not have the communicative strength that was shared by a localised community.[[39]](#footnote-39) Tönnies believed that social support was built on a normalised understanding of mutual affirmation and sympathy, which he recognised as being facilitated by communicative exchanges of social value within communities.[[40]](#footnote-40),[[41]](#footnote-41)

Tönnies dichotomy defines *community* as an organic life based on affective and emotive ties, whilst *society* is mechanical or based on purposive and instrumental relationships, in an almost prescient analogue to the contemporary social situation as defined by global communication networking.[[42]](#footnote-42) He believed that that relationships of mutual affection could only form social cohesion locally, in communitarian forms, in local settings, and with Max Weber saw society based on purposive relationships.[[43]](#footnote-43) This individualism weakened the collectivity through commonality that Tönnies believed sustained communities, uniting individuals despite factors which aimed to separate them by fostering security and safety through continuous loyalties and support.[[44]](#footnote-44) Tönnies warned that the social connections fostered through exchanges of value would be transient in nature because voluntary associations would not be able to support binding relationships.[[45]](#footnote-45) These tight bonds were formed through *social will[[46]](#footnote-46)* which with communication was able to maintain both worldview (*Weltanschauung*) and moral value within a shared system of signs and symbols.[[47]](#footnote-47) For Tönnies, there could be no elements of community within society because there was no way to renew or maintain such a system at a distance, nor to maintain a balance between the public and private life worlds of individuals.[[48]](#footnote-48)

## From Place to Space

Social relationships in the digital era are based on voluntary association maintained through reciprocal action occurring online. The practice of association and communication online creates an internet social space, a place created through practice, which is accessible through technology regardless of geography.[[49]](#footnote-49) The internet serves as both a field of communication and repository of information that is accessible to a wide population. Access to the internet has made information and communication resources less scarce, and through mobile technology easily personalised. This is also supported by the opportunity for continual, and sustained access to materials that are constructed and maintained collaboratively to foster cohesion beyond local communities.

This shift from community to society being unidirectional and univocally negative has been mediated by the embedding of the internet in our social practices and by advances in individuals mobile technology. These advances in digital communication have created new ways to foster close social relationships that are individualised and purposive – a hybrid of elements from both Tönnies community and society. The internet’s accessibility, participation and storage capacities forced reconsiderations of the concept of place in interactions in the digital era technological mediation allows for deeper connections embodied through an abstract sense of space.[[50]](#footnote-50) The internet facilitates networked space and society by causing a context collapse of local communication and sociality into the digital world, with local practices becoming mediatised.

In the digital era meaning is constructed though increasingly accessible communication channels that are accessed by individuals linked with little regards to traditional temporal-spatial constraints creating social cohesion from interactions and relations in this new space in addition to traditional formats.[[51]](#footnote-51) Social connections have been able to foster the same social supports, norms and values as cohesion through community in mediated network societies, with new systems that allow the sharing of resources and information.[[52]](#footnote-52) A new sense of publicness through participation in the internet as an accessible space serves as a basis for everyday understandings created through looser and larger networked systems of meaning making that bridge individuals with a sense of “being-with” each other online in space instead of in physical place through communication.[[53]](#footnote-53)

Once religion is divorced from territoriality and social obligation, those who remain associated with religious communities and networks do so voluntarily. With the secularisation of society, the sense of religious social obligation lessened and allowed individuals to approach social meaning through personalised and deterritorialised relationships and interactions.[[54]](#footnote-54) The internet fosters this voluntary culture, with the ease of access to digital communication networks creating an increased hybridity between the experience and expression of the self and society on and offline.[[55]](#footnote-55)

# Network Sociality

The modern period has demonstrated the need to adapt and expand concepts of sociality to better examine how relationships have become increasingly personalised with the digital affordances of new media technology. A social network system allows for personal relationships between individuals and can be multiuser, promote interactions with diverse others, allow for multitasking, permit relationships serving several needs, and be multithreaded in achieving these things simultaneously.[[56]](#footnote-56) When understood as a series of networks instead of the traditional community format, cohesion and connectivity in social relationships are dis-embedded from collective social boundaries. Unlike the homogenous membership-based interactions that form pre-digital communities, within a network system paradigm, every individual becomes a node in connectivity. As computer mediated communication (*CMC*) is increasingly adopted into the social sphere, a network operating system illustrates how connectivity is fostered through technologies to allow access to a new range of interaction that is not limited by time or locality.

Digital media can transfer and reproduce information across many distinct platforms in easily manipulated formats that promote networks for storage and access affordances.[[57]](#footnote-57) The redefinition of place outside of space and time as the origin point for communication has made it a relational concept that can be individualised, and tapped into by networks.[[58]](#footnote-58) The integration of digital technologies into communication and social connectivity through media has enabled convergences and integrations of networks and individuals which allow it to dominate the systems.[[59]](#footnote-59) Because CMC convergence does not rely on a specific delivery mechanism access to digital communication is able to move seamlessly across platforms, both mobile space and fixed-point places.[[60]](#footnote-60)

Yet while these affordances have changed the ways humans communicate, they have not yet become universally available. The infrastructures of social networking through CMC construct a *digital divide* which effects difference between groups in developed and developing nations, and geography, and enacts itself in differences of gender, age and generation. This is a stark contrast with growing sense of *glocalisation* (global localisation) that is fostered by the interactions and routines of life that have become embedded in the digital which brings individuals at a physical and social distance closer together in a mobile online social space. Although a network sociality paradigm explains cohesion and connectivity online, the experience of mediatised culture is not universal, and requires more than access to digital infrastructure.

Globalisation in the late modern period implies a change in the configuration of people, places and images.[[61]](#footnote-61) Simultaneously, digital technological affordances allow for almost instant, lasting and personally broadcast communication which changes the temporality of social experience. The development of new media as a space where information is made available and transmitted has made the virtual real, by making the mobile space of the internet becoming an indispensable location for translocal social interaction. Digital media has made the internet into a participatory space not bound by locality or temporality, and social networks allow links between people to exist with looser bonds that are only activated to serve needs, and are maintained without face to face communication. The accessible communication through CMC has made engagement and maintenance of social relationships more individualised, with personalised connections shaping networks like those produced through social network sites (SNS) which allow the personal publication of an individual profile of a user’s identity for online communication.[[62]](#footnote-62) The *produser* (producer-consumer) identity of digital media users has made participation in religiously oriented discussion or action online individual and has wrest control from institutions, and enacted a form of de-privatisation of religion in online space.[[63]](#footnote-63) The sociality fostered by network connections has allowed religion to enter negotiation with new media technology as a tool for fostering global networking, proselytization, and the digitisation of information and ritual.[[64]](#footnote-64)

Network sociality allows freedom for differentiated relationships and personal interactions that would not have been acceptable in traditional community social norms. Networked individualism concentrates on the duality of the new social schemata: maintaining rules and constraints to relationships whilst fostering new opportunities and procedures which foster sociality at the individual level. Social networking describes the system of building a set of relations between network members. By building social networks instead of communities, everyone is able to control the relationships in their personal network and to develop new strategies for sociality which are not equivalent to the sum of members.[[65]](#footnote-65) Interactions between individuals means that a reciprocal system of support is developed to serve personal needs, and create relationships based on similar needs and experiences.[[66]](#footnote-66) Because network relationships are not exclusive, individuals can instrumentally manoeuvre the capacities and affordances of their operations to act as spaces for belonging, provision of aid and information, social support and for building social capital by servicing the needs of others. [[67]](#footnote-67)

Individual users of social network sites (*SNS*) create identities through relationships by forming networked connections rather than community formatted groups of offline religious institutions. This change in relationships reflects the increased transparency of identity online, which has become devoid of hierarchical connotations.[[68]](#footnote-68) Instead of choosing a religious community to follow, religion and social media allows individuals to make connections within networks and to act as the co-constructors of meanings and symbols, and to use them as a framework in constructing practices and beliefs.[[69]](#footnote-69) SNS also offer salient platforms for engagement with others for the capture and sharing of information and dialogue, creating an accessible space for personal publication outside institutional boundaries.[[70]](#footnote-70) Networked sociality flattens the power dynamics found in traditional communities and institutionally based systems allowing users of varying affiliations and commitments to a systems ideology through forms of shared intentionality. In this way interactions between individuals create a collaborative system of sociality that can adapt to the relationality of multiple voices.

The use of networked communications is motivated by the desire to construct consistent, mutually understandable fields of communication to convey a system of conventions for social connectivity and cohesion.[[71]](#footnote-71) The semiotic systems embedded in networks are structures that appear to reproduce the dominant forms of social belonging but are actually more flexible, and expand by building on relationships of mutual trust and reputation.[[72]](#footnote-72) This sharing has forged an increasingly relational understanding of social belonging separate from both the Aristotelian[[73]](#footnote-73) thinking which defined the world in bound groups, and the Linnaean[[74]](#footnote-74) thinking which proposed that these groups could be easily subdivided, as individuals are able to interact with more diverse others.[[75]](#footnote-75) Despite this it is important to note that a social network is not a random assortment of ties, but rather the sets of relationships and resource channels which are used to connect people.

The interactions and relationships that form an individual’s social network are diverse and service different purposive needs. This leads to participation in *network brokerage* to build connections across social circles to provide exposure to information and resources through bridging ties which allow entrance into network relationships and bonding ties which forge solidarity through a shared construction of semiotic meaning.[[76]](#footnote-76) The ability to engage in brokerage is tied in part to the affordances for individual relationships within network sociality that distinguish it from communitisation[[77]](#footnote-77). Because an individual can engage with multiple networks and networked individuals, membership is no longer tied to the boundaries and structures of group membership. Instead making religious identity tantamount to group membership, networking provides more flexible autonomy. As network sociality expands, religious identity becomes a part of the limited involvement and liability that individuals use to foster sharing with a more diverse range of others.[[78]](#footnote-78) Because network sociality does not obligate support between individuals who have relationships, connections can be made which operate for specific situations and purposes.

CMC infrastructures which operate network sociality within mundane internet use exemplify the ease of communication enabled by the relative anonymity of the online space, which allows individuals who might otherwise feel stifled to present increasingly open communications of the self online.[[79]](#footnote-79) These communications represent the blurring of the boundary between the public and private spheres with the communication intimate details of one’s life, including religious belief to a public audience being achieved through digital media. CMC offer features that allow users to maintain social interactions by communicating to individuals or to groups, through private or group emails, messages, and public commenting, and separate communication to networks-within-networks based on interest.[[80]](#footnote-80) Based on this framework, social network environments mediate appropriate communication for presentation to a specific audience, and for communication to be narrowcast, communicated at a large scale to specific network audiences. One of the most affective and effective ways that religious ideology has been mobilised in the last decade lies in its use of media as a “means of execution” to gather and connect a group through a shared sense of belonging to a public.[[81]](#footnote-81) The shared agency that media provides to individuals in constructing social forces through relational projects creates a more engaged public who can easily interact.

Social media creates links between the private and public spheres by mediating communication between the two and by allowing people to interact symbolically in spaces that are not controlled by the influence of media or religious institutions but rather by the produsers within this network space. Because meaning becomes a relational construction project between all members of the network, the interactive format facilitates further challenges to institutional practices that have been shunned from the public sphere in an offline setting because the internet does not designate in the same way between public and private.[[82]](#footnote-82) This mediation means that meanings are not absolute, instead they are nuanced productions of individuals who form relationships through communication and interaction to create shared meanings that can foster a sense of belonging.[[83]](#footnote-83) The ways in which religion is expressed through SNS involve individual communications but also messages that are broadcast across networks, and narrowcast to groups within sub-networks, meaning that the internet gives access and controls communication between differentiable audiences creating multiple layered network publics.[[84]](#footnote-84)

Many early studies of religion on the internet feared that the internet would create fractures in exiting religious communities because of the social networked structures it created and the impact of changing modes of authority and legitimation in replacing offline religion.[[85]](#footnote-85),[[86]](#footnote-86),[[87]](#footnote-87) Because online content is user-generated institutional bodies found themselves forced to adapt to a technological shift that manifest in the potential for a global breadth of information dissemination and meaning creation.[[88]](#footnote-88) The infrastructure created by digital media created an opportunity to shift religion back into the immanent realm and to be found individually.[[89]](#footnote-89) Because institutional religions had no control over the development of technology or of content online the internet facilitated the expansion of practicing religion as it appealed to individuals both personally and privately.[[90]](#footnote-90)

The difference between network sociality and the uncertainty of networking for new relationships can be mapped onto Christopher Helland’s typology of religious manifestations on the Internet. Helland divided religious manifestations on the internet into two: religion online, which moved existing traditions into the cyber environment, and online religion, a term which was used in predictions of new religious movements online, as well as new rituals online replacing those in the real world. Religion online was used to describe existing traditions using the internet as a space distinct from the limitations of time, space and geography to share information outside the constraints of institutional dogma. In contrast online religion describes the internet as a space distinct from the real social sphere of lived experience as a landscape for new forms of contemporary spirituality.[[91]](#footnote-91) This designation can be mapped onto the realities of the network society in contrast with a networking society: the former encompassing and expanding upon pre-established social communities, and the latter a reference to establishing new connections.[[92]](#footnote-92) Because of this, network sociality allows a broader opportunity to explore translocal social spheres, and to explore the ethical implications of modern life.[[93]](#footnote-93)

A similar approach which can be mapped onto the differences between community and network sociality paradigms is seen in the two concepts of culture Jan Nedervee Pieterse developed: the territorial, which maps more closely to local communities with inwardly oriented goals, and the translocal, which acts as a functional organism constantly undergoing processes of translation and hybridization to mediate encounters and communication relationships.[[94]](#footnote-94) Networks can also be understood as a social world that is constructed both communicatively and intersubjectively outside the boundaries of territorial communitisations.[[95]](#footnote-95) Stuart Hill has suggested that the cultural properties that are associated with community and religious groups, including language, custom and tradition have been projected onto territoriality but are more constitutive of communicative social relationships. Most human experience is dealt with locally: communications are dealt with face to face with an immediate connection, however digital media has mastered the rise of translocal cultures by expanding the boundaries and horizons of a shared semiotic field.[[96]](#footnote-96) When religion is conceptualised through these lenses, it becomes a system of imagined community[[97]](#footnote-97), deterritorialised and able to reach an expanding population.[[98]](#footnote-98)

Network sociality fosters communication with “open structures, able to expand without limits,”[[99]](#footnote-99) with the internet acting as a deterritorialised space for the location of centralised communicative and semiotic network.[[100]](#footnote-100) This allows for connections and ties to be maintained by an affective sense of belonging created through reciprocal relationships that do not demand physical presence. Unlike the face-to-face relations that mandate membership in a territorially bound community, translocal communitisations have based belonging on the maintenance of ongoing and parallel communication.[[101]](#footnote-101) Because over 70% of the planet has access to wireless communication, CMC networks have developed a system of horizontal interactive communication which connects the global and local in a chosen time.[[102]](#footnote-102) When the nodes of a network are clustered close together the system is able to function like a local community, with a limited number of steps to build a connection to the entire network by any individual. Although aspects of the digital divide persist, the expansion of internet communicationtechnology (ICT) has meant that more interactions can take place between localities, and this is boosted by the rise of personal media. These technologies are used to construct a new infrastructure for network sociality that relies on connectivity and immediacy for access and sharing of culture.[[103]](#footnote-103)

The internet’s impact on the routines of daily life have reconfigured accessibility by transcending the barriers of the real and virtual divide through forms of communication, which like translocality foster closer connections between peoples at a distance through shared experience.[[104]](#footnote-104) The processes of communication upon which network sociality is built undergo a constant process of translation as they engage in a culture of media productions from various locations, and languages. In this way sharing religion through digital media networks becomes another in a line of communicative actions, that are focussed on solidifying the claims of religion to control meanings and truth claims.[[105]](#footnote-105) Religion is no longer able to control the discourse or dissemination of religiosity that may be spread and extended to new populations through media which operates independently. This separation of the two social institutions has meant that media is simultaneously the way to extend religious outreach, and acts as the accessible extension of religion to geographically diverse populations.[[106]](#footnote-106)

# Religion in the Digital Age

Religion has adapted and changed structure in the digital age with new interactions made possible through technology. In this chapter I address the impact of the internet on religion in the digital age through an analysis of internet dispersion, the normalisation of media communication through mediatisation of culture as well as the redefinition of the internet as a widely accessible public space. The study of religion and the internet has been conceptualised by Morten Højsgaard and Margit Warburg, and later by Heidi Campbell as a series of waves representing different scholarly conceptions that have become the field of digital religion.[[107]](#footnote-107), [[108]](#footnote-108) Digital religion as a techno-cultural social space is evocative of the integrated experience of on and offline practices, fostering both new religious expressions (*online religion*) and extending the practices of existing religious traditions (*religion online*).[[109]](#footnote-109) The rise of web 2.0, which made the internet a social participatory space which projected am almost infinite database of accessible information challenged the authority structures associated with studying religion offline and replaced dogmatic religious textual orientations with more plural and broad understandings. Digital media communication and interactions build new fields of symbolic meaning making and negotiation which demonstrate a new and important way that individuals can practice religion.[[110]](#footnote-110) The internet provided a means for the pubic to become more engaged and active participating in the creation and maintenance of the digital supply of information. The web emerged as a networked technology, and could traverse the line between the public and private elements of individuals lives by allowing personalised mobile self-broadcasting projecting institutional agency.[[111]](#footnote-111) The accessibility of information and interaction through CMC is contingent with the founding rationale of mobile digital technology, which was designed to reconcile dispersed individuals by manifesting a social space.[[112]](#footnote-112) In this chapter I use the development of the internet and it’s adoption into everyday experience to explain how digital religion was able to develop and the different ways that social solidarity is fostered through mediatised culture without face-to-face interactions.

## The Internet

Developed in 1969 as a technology for educational and military purposes, by the end of the 1990s when personal computing began to gain popularity, the internet boasted 1.7 million websites dedicated to topics on religion.[[113]](#footnote-113) The internet is the most rapidly diffused technology in media history, and alongside the decline of public religious authority, the internet has allowed for the manifestation of “networked publics”[[114]](#footnote-114) through online communication. Unlike communication in the pre-digital era the ability to participate in the construction and maintenance of information online is durable, accessible, reproducible and provides individuals with control over their anonymity. Early internet studies picked up on the enthusiasm early-CMC adopters displayed for replication and replacing offline experience with online and the practice of forging an offline identity distinct from their online identity. However, for most, the merger of CMC technology and mobile internet devices means that participating in the digital public sphere quickly became a mundane component of individual experience.[[115]](#footnote-115) The rapid diffusion of the internet worldwide introduced a new infrastructure upon which to build religious structures, practices and norms. The development of social connections being built through participation and communication in web 2.0 and through social networking through social media increased the interactivity of the web, and allowed for the development of a manifold on- and offline religious identity within the practice of CMC.[[116]](#footnote-116)

## Concepts for the Study of Digital Religion

Understanding the history of digital religion demonstrates why the shift from traditional community paradigm to a network sociality paradigm becomes increasingly tenable as digital mediatisation becomes universal. Research on digital religion has proceeded in four waves each characterised by distinct research questions and methods which defined scholarly practices. The first wave was a descriptive phase, documenting the practice of religion online, and is followed by the second wave where typologies and categories to describe these practice were developed. Christopher Helland’s definitions of *religion* online and *online religion* describe how understandings of religion in the digital sphere developed from the second wave of research. The study of religion online focused on how existing traditions operated in the cyber environment and while the study of online religion focused on distinct religious traditions operating only online.[[117]](#footnote-117) The first waves of research were concerned with the internet and religion as two distinct phenomena and occured before the development of user-friendly graphic interfaces in the late 1990s which promoted religious communication through the cultural shift into CMC. By becoming an accessible reservoir of information, the internet became a new social space for the communication of religiosity between individuals, rather than through institutional or dogmatic channels. In the age of digital information, the third and fourth waves of research on religion online concluded that virtual platforms could supplement religious communication previously achieved through face-to-face gatherings and community membership.[[118]](#footnote-118)

A new cyber-social culture centred on the notion of interactivity was fostered as the internet, which is able to store and transmit information as well as connect individuals for communication afforded the same abilities as earlier media technologies.[[119]](#footnote-119) Elements of old media and new media merged in a “bricolage” with religion through CMC affordances leading to a third wave of research on digital religion, which demanded a new theoretical turn to accommodate the increasingly ubiquitous nature of new media technology in the framework. This continues in the current fourth wave of studies of religion and the internet, which seeks to address this negation of the distinction between off and online lives and the impact this has on informing religious sociability.[[120]](#footnote-120)

Individual access to the internet changed religion by challenging the institutional hegemony per which only institutions could provide authentic religious information to the public. The ability to produce and distribute multi-directional content online challenged the plausibility structures of singular religious authority.[[121]](#footnote-121) As a result digital religion expanded itself to adapt to the network sociability that the internet promoted interactions and relationships based on weak ties that could be instrumentalised instead of undifferentiated close relationships of support fostered by pre-digital communities. Exchanging the hierarchical authority which bound religious communities together offline, a social network approach through CMC flattens authority by forging reciprocal relations between individuals. The instrumentalisation of relationships meant that a new social order maintained through communication can create durable ties to one another online. Because web 2.0 fostered a *produser* (producer-user) oriented development of symbols and practices social networks online could provide social benefits that religious communities had ordered offline.[[122]](#footnote-122) The social network approach to sociability demonstrated how ego-centric behaviours could be extended to foster voluntary relationships between actors who then generate religious meaning and practices together. Religion communicated online in this way is demonstrative of the fact that it is individuals online who create religious groups and meaning, through production and participation in information exchange.[[123]](#footnote-123) The relational construction of religiosity through social networks has made individual agency a part of the construction.

Studying religion online brought into question several facets of religion that were previously defined by face-to-face communications and interactions in the pre-digital era. Initial studies assumed that the interactions which occurred online would operate as though in a separate space, disembodied from these face-to-face interactions.[[124]](#footnote-124) Despite the possibility of dystopic fears of online communications creating a situation wherein individuals were isolating themselves, and creating differentiated identities online, the internet through computer mediated communication (*CMC*) provided possibilities for the de-differentiation of identity by enhancing the capacity for social sharing. The socio-cultural sphere manifest through digital technology and connected through the internet allows for a blending of the private and public spheres, as individuals can distribute their own texts and images in a public space.[[125]](#footnote-125)

## The Publicity of Religion and Digital Infrastructure

The infrastructure created by digital media created an opportunity to shift the religiosity back into public consciousness and to be found individually.[[126]](#footnote-126) Institutional religions had no control over the development of technology or content online the internet facilitated the expansion of practicing religion as it appealed to individuals personally and privately.[[127]](#footnote-127)

Religious institutions and early scholarly work were concerned that digital manifestations of religion, “online churches”, and theological discussions, would replace offline religious participation. This lead to fears that people would develop into “hyperindividuals” whose entire lives are lived online, to the exclusion of, and abandonment of offline connections.[[128]](#footnote-128) This echoes Baudrillard’s third order of simulacra, or *hyperreality* in which a simulated copy supersedes the original subject, transforming our sense of what is real and unreal so that the copy is more meaningful than the original.[[129]](#footnote-129) The experience of identity online was positioned as a potential substitute for face-to-face religiosity. In contrast the internet developed as a space for religious narrowcasting of information through new media to niche audiences, and allowed for an additional space for individuals to develop religious identity free from social and institutional repercussions and boundaries.[[130]](#footnote-130)

The internet changed the way that individuals engage with each other by focusing on networked relationships, the interactions between individuals, which are centered around the self. By “enhancing individual ability” to address and endless stream of information through social networking and the ability to filter content for instrumental access and personal interests, the internet can be made personal.[[131]](#footnote-131) As the integration of the internet into our daily lives becomes increasingly complete and mundane the internet acts not as a replacement for our offline relationships, but as a supplement to them.[[132]](#footnote-132) James Slevin described these new relationships as creating “arenas of circulation”, socially constructed contexts that transcend the online and offline binary division, but require access to computer technology to use. Technological convergences have meant that CMC do not depend on a specific delivery mechanism, a paradigm shift in communication flow structures, which has developed into a sense of multi-platforming, or moving seamlessly across platforms. This convergence is reflected in the experience of expressing individual identity online, as online identity becomes increasingly coextensive with offline.[[133]](#footnote-133) The ability to operate in a multi-platform environment means that unlike pre-digital communication, digital communication is available identically in multiple locations and on many devices.

Conceptualizing the internet as a virtual social space allows for communication technology and interactions to occur amidst active play for authority and control between individuals and between institutions like media and religion in space and time. The internet provides information that can be simultaneously accessed by a wide-audience, at multiple locations, but this technically mediated sociability also has the potential to promote information poverty[[134]](#footnote-134).

Although internet access and technology is widespread globally, neither the technology nor the content is universal. Amongst the most salient concerns of scholars of religion and internet communication the contention of the internet’s universality for accessibility to infrastructure and the effect this will have on those individuals who are late-comers to the internet as an interactive medium.[[135]](#footnote-135) The barriers to accessing digital infrastructure come under the umbrella of the *digital divide*.[[136]](#footnote-136) The convergence of the internet with multiple technologies is important in expanding access to the internet, but for the internet to foster sociability access alone does not suffice. For a population to operate network sociability through CMC computer and media access and literacy must be combined with interactivity and a sense of reciprocal transactions that build trust through participation for feelings of affective solidarity to occur.[[137]](#footnote-137)

The technology necessary for internet access has affected the creation of ideology online and the related beliefs and practices that are developed to foster a sense of belonging through a constant process of negotiation between individuals. This is symbolic of Zygmunt Bauman’s *liquid modernity*, a “period of global capitalism where life is constantly changing,” and becoming “highly mediated” by technology and media affordances which change the experience of social connection and interaction into something highly fluid.[[138]](#footnote-138) Digital religion exhibits changes in digital social experience by fostering three features that offline religion did not: interactivity, hypertextuality and accessible methods of dispersion. The diffusion of the internet into personal mobile technology affects the ability of users to interact and respond to each other with an almost immediate ability to monitor the effects. The network nature of hypertextuality online means that digital religion presents and connects more choices of links to religious information for an individual. These two phenomena combined with the decentralization of religious information and control online and the diffusion of the internet into the fabric of everyday life have allowed religion to re-enter the fabric of everyday life within the context of liquid modernity by adapting to a new media framework.[[139]](#footnote-139) The experience of the new media framework has increasingly made relying upon digital media infrastructure for access to communicative fields a part of the common social experience.

## Mediatisation and the Digital

The term mediatisation is applied to social situations where activities have been made functionally dependent on media and can explain changes in both digital religious sociality and in digital religiosity. The moulding of our communication repertoire by the emergence of new media technologies, particularly digital media and the internet, have made mediated communication a normalised cultural form, with life led increasingly “within and through the media.”[[140]](#footnote-140),[[141]](#footnote-141) Media convergence occurs within other social processes through its indispensability for engagement with the public sphere, its part in the preformation of experiences, and its normalisation into social practice, which amalgamate media into morally saturated environments like religion and culture as new sources for modes of being.[[142]](#footnote-142) Mediatisation of culture is the shifting of social expectations of experience from the immediate face-to-face into a system wherein interactions are able to occur online in a non-geographic or temporally bound space.

Mediatisation[[143]](#footnote-143) is conceptualized both as a modern metaprocess constructed by communicative action and as a transformation of the conditions of communication space in social life by embedding them in digital technology.[[144]](#footnote-144),[[145]](#footnote-145) The first conception enabled media as an institution to emerge as a social system independent of religion and to influence and subsume the presence of religion in both the public sphere and fields of logic and meaning. This changed the perspective of discourse from the monopoly of the religious voice to once which promoted many opinions. The second conception of mediatisation is representative how media has become embedded in our lives through the technological affordances and convergences for communication that mediate the modern field of possibility through communication. The reliance of everyday communication and information practices upon media and the moulding of social practice by media, has led to what Andreas Hepp (2016) calls the “deep mediatisation” [[146]](#footnote-146) of the digital era, which occurs when new media asserts itself as an “irreducible dimension of all social processes,” and the construction of reality.[[147]](#footnote-147)

The use of media to create a semiotic communicative field means that media is increasingly involved in shaping our everyday life and in defining the character of the social world in deep mediatisation.[[148]](#footnote-148) Hepp (2012) described this as a gathering of “reciprocal, produced and virtualised media communication” in tandem with other social institutions to participate in the construction of social realities and facts.[[149]](#footnote-149) By controlling the construction of meanings and symbols, media takes on a role in defining the logic of social interactions. Media subsumes a role that had previously been held by religion alone, with mediatisation reifying media logic and contributing to endurance of technical infrastructure for new media.

Mediatisations rely on the structuring influence that media affordances have on social interaction and meaning making, which in turn weakens religion as a social institution as well as religion’s ability to function in a structural capacity as sacred canopy[[150]](#footnote-150). In this way mediatisation, can been said to have wrest control of dynamic meaning-making by religion and moulded it into forms conducive to media proliferation, and mediated interaction.[[151]](#footnote-151) The process of mediatisation is enacted in religion through the mirroring of religious media presentation and their anticipated forms of presentation by media so that religions become complex systems of mediatisation in both function and identity such all sociality relies on the digital.[[152]](#footnote-152) The interactions between religion and media that facilitate mediatisation are dually managed through the religious media who manage institutional information and expressions and by merging forms of religious reality with media for expression.[[153]](#footnote-153)

## Mediatisation and Digital Religion

The role of media as an institution in propagating reason and informing logic allows it to control the re-emergence of religious messages in the public consciousness after secularisation and prepares it for the shift to network sociality through CMC. The media have been differentiated as their own system, and thus although religion has always been distributed through media, mediatised religion represents the shift to a mutual influence between religion and media power.[[154]](#footnote-154) Mediatised communications and practices online become the new centres for sharing and constructing knowledge about religion.[[155]](#footnote-155) With religious meanings increasingly dependent on media for dissemination, and as a source of imagery and texts, the media manifest new institutional modes of engagement with the spiritual dimension of experience in the public sphere with control over access to religious messages.[[156]](#footnote-156)

Günter Thomas identifies four tendencies which ground the mediatisation of religion: (1) media as a system manage impressions of established religions to serve its interests, (2) functional differentiation “dethrones” religion from control of the public sphere, (3) the move by media to mould and manage emotion and attention in society means that it acts as a *bricoleur* in constructing meaning, and finally (4) the return of religious media contributes to banalised[[157]](#footnote-157) non-institutional forms of religiosity. Defining the plurality of modern constructions of religion through the process of mediatisation demonstrates how changing everyday practices to include media has also impacted the content of media messages by providing symbolic elements which are mutually understood and widely recognised.[[158]](#footnote-158)

In a mediatised social setting, the authority of religion has been functionally differentiated in control over of public opinion and access to information, because individuals are autonomously able to access and create web content. With mediatised society providing, and relying on multiple viewpoints, religion’s place in media becomes one of many voices which shape experiences and reality. For religion to operate in a mediatised world, it must rely more heavily on individual worshippers to disseminate systems of belief and practices through a presence in the media sphere. In this way, the individual believers can transfer the presence of religion back into the public eye as the embodiment of their systems of belief.[[159]](#footnote-159) The broken monopoly of religion as the central operator of social dynamics means that access to religion was enabled in the competitive field of modern religions, mediated by the ability to transmit a message through technological affordances to force a symbolic unity.[[160]](#footnote-160) By forging spaces that operate through media and with shared symbolic understandings, religion in the media super-space[[161]](#footnote-161) has become more accessible to the public through enhanced availability, translation, and by increasingly plural interpretations. The operation of religion in the media sphere is differentiated from traditional religiosity with the influx of participation in defining how religion will be instrumentalised and act as a defining element in individual decision-making.[[162]](#footnote-162) Each individual is able to search for and compile religiosity that best suits that own needs, and can be made personal or broadcast in a social network environment.

The internet has created new opportunities for communication amongst religious actors who are temporally and/or geographically distant and has allowed for plural religious voices to challenge traditional religious authorities through the rise of networked individualism. The shift from the primacy of traditional religion is often conceived of as a process of secularisation, and is in part mediated by the ways that religious groups operate in line with and through various media technologies. The technological and social affordances of digital media communications have also controlled the ability of religious messages to enter the public consciousness during late modernity with the rise of digital media communications from the 2000s onwards which allowed for produsers to participate in creating an online compendium of religiosity.[[163]](#footnote-163) In this way the internet becomes a familiar resource for individuals to interact with religion in their everyday experience.

Describing digital religion as “banal” reflects the continuous process of blurring boundaries between on and offline social culture and practices in a mediatized culture.[[164]](#footnote-164) To approach the study of the social and communal implications the internet a culturalist interpretation[[165]](#footnote-165) dictates an interdisciplinary examination of the role of media as a medium for the communication of religion, and in the creation of religious messages.[[166]](#footnote-166) Ultimately the internet has become a major player in communicating religious messages through new media platforms and has forced the loosening of religious symbols and images from their institutional contexts as they are manipulated and reinterpreted across networks of individuals. The participatory culture of digital religion means that authority is based in temporary, more personalized actions, which can then be used to connect to other nodes of a religious network.[[167]](#footnote-167)

Although digitalization has the power to undo religious communities as they have been traditionally conceived by fostering a sense of translocal community, it also has also claimed the power to frame religious symbols, values and truths online as de-privatised religiosity allowed individuals to participate in the co-production of meanings.[[168]](#footnote-168) The possibilities for global convergence and integration that digital technology offers have improved the speed, efficiency and affordability of global communication creating a more socially interconnected world. The everyday meanings produced by these interconnections and interactions between a diverse audience and from myriad voices may facilitate new forms of social integration beyond geo-spatial dimensions.[[169]](#footnote-169)

# Network Sociality among the Religious

In this chapter I argue that religiosity is well-suited to be adapted for network sociality. First I discuss the impact of personalisation and individual agency on religiosity online and connect this to changes in the development of group identity. Next I consider Jewish diaspora through the lens of network sociality instead of translocal community formation with emphasis on the example of the Chabad ultra-orthodox community who were early adopters of digital technology to promote religious discourse and outreach.[[170]](#footnote-170)

## The Self and the Group in Religious Network Sociality

The development of new forms of network sociality through digital affordances creates a dynamic which redefines traditional concepts of space, authority, identity and control to negotiate the socio-cultural features of the digital world. The introduction of media logic into negotiations of religious belief and identity have shifted personal and individualised systems of belief towards individual agency in constructing fields of meaning. Although the power of the media to define the communicative field for religion is described by Meyer and Moors as having “both a stabilizing” potential and “an enabling potential” to rewrite social views of religion for the contemporary public sphere, it is through mediatisation that the digital creates a new space for social engagement.[[171]](#footnote-171) The media super-space allowed the participation of multiple produser voices in creating and maintaining religious resources online, with individual’s claims to authority not mandated by institutions.

The movement of religion into digital culture gave it a new form of reflexivity: the produser designation has empowered individuals’ autonomous decision making by allowing them to control the flow of information and to create hybrid and fluid personal identities. Becoming a part of both the consumption and production of information in the age of personal digital media separates the socio-cultural norms and boundaries to behaviour and interaction from religious morality, and instead makes them a reflexive component of actively building identities in the online and maintenance of what constitutes the boundaries of religious groups, symbols and practices.[[172]](#footnote-172) The changed dynamic of the social media era began shifted ultimate authority in meaning-making away from institutional bodies in religion and shifted informational authority from media institutions.[[173]](#footnote-173) Network sociality through social network sites (SNS) allowed media to be easily used act as a distinct environment for the creation of self and group identities. Defining identity through social media use makes interactions the focus for finding and accommodating patterns of similarity and difference in identity.

Within network religious sociality the transformation of interactivity by CMC has been translated into a more instrumental system of group building. This system can be examined based on Ronald Burt’s concept of *network brokerage* for individuals.[[174]](#footnote-174) Modernisation through media and global connectivity has facilitated exposure to more diverse opinions and behaviours. Burt identified two trends in the types of ties built through network sociality: “bridging ties” which allow access to a cluster of network relationships regardless of geo-spatial constraints, and “bonding ties” which are formed in communicating a sense of trust and solidarity through reciprocity.[[175]](#footnote-175) In this way network individualism became the portal for individuals to personalise interactions and self-expressions by controlling their interactions and relationships.

The impact of mediatised communication was marred by the view that relationships without face-to-face communication would foster isolation. Instead the transfer of control to the individual in choosing relationships orients network society towards connections based on personal interests or desired access. Network relationships can constantly expand and contract and this flexibility allowed individuals to build personal social networks. With mediatisation, increased access to ICTs and using social networks to communicate online became a normative part of expressing the self. These technologies have also allowed groups of individuals to bond themselves based on a single cohesive self, which is reconfigured based on the nature of its relationships. The shift from static control and hierarchy in relationships allows individuals to interact and participate differently with others to achieve different types of purposive relationship which provide social supports and, and to share different aspects of social meaning to foster cohesion through a sense of belonging.[[176]](#footnote-176)

With online socio-cultural infrastructure and through CMC and social media, identities are mediated by unique experiences and the location of the individual in relation to the meanings and practices with which they engage. The advent of personal digital media for religious identity formation changed the understandings of what mandated an authentic religious identity from institutional and communal belonging into a form of personalised performance identity. These performance identities can be enacted on SNS, which are “web-based services” for the circulation of content generated by social media, that allow individuals to do three things:

“1) Construct a public or semi-public profile,

2) Articulate a list of those individuals with whom connections are shared, and

3) View their connections within the system.”[[177]](#footnote-177) These functionalities mean that SNS are places where an individual is able to both support existing social relationships, and foster new connections.[[178]](#footnote-178) Douglas E. Cowan describes three varieties of performance ideas used to enact religion online:

1. Using religion as a mask: when one’s primary online identity is religious,
2. Using religion as an additional venue to perform religious identity, and
3. Presenting the self as an “instant expert” in religion online, regardless of experience.[[179]](#footnote-179) These performance identities are all attributed to individual behaviours instead of the group oriented community action of pre-digital religious identity.

In an SNS environment, individuals can exercise more control over which elements of themselves are presented to others in the creation of their “autobiographic narratives.[[180]](#footnote-180) Social Networking Sites are an alternative location for the public display of connections that one uses to navigate the networked social world and to maintain relationships through virtual interactions on both the individual and broadcast communication levels. The ability to choose what elements they include in the public construction of their identity and by challenges the top-down hierarchy of institutional religion by giving more control of information to the public. By shifting power to the individuals social media and religion embraced the increased interactivity, equality and democracy fostered by free access to the internet.

## Religious Bonding: Extending Jewish Translocality in Diaspora

Most of the history of the Jewish population has occurred outside of the promised biblical homeland and without the divinely appointed sovereign-rule of the chosen people. This separation of the Jewish population from the land of Israel occurred in waves of exilic expulsions, associated with destruction of the two Temples in Jerusalem, in 586/7 BCE and in 70 CE respectively.[[181]](#footnote-181) This violent destruction of the Jewish worship infrastructure had an expansive effect on the indigenous Hebrew religion, with commandments and laws that operated in specifically in the geographic context of Israel.[[182]](#footnote-182) These geographically oriented features of the Jewish religion had to be adapted or abandoned for non-local community building and practice.

The dispersion of the Jewish people meant that a set of uniform laws and rituals based on geography were no longer a tenable method for unifying the diverse set of Jews and their practices. The nullification of land-based commandments that resulted from the loss of Jewish sovereign control of Israel meant that plural Judaisms with diversified practices and ideology emerged in reaction to cultural encounters with the other.[[183]](#footnote-183) Diaspora communities were formed based on membership in an *imagined community* of ethno-historically Jewish people connected to the land of Israel as a centre for collective identification.[[184]](#footnote-184)

For progressive religious leaders religiosity mediatised culture has entailed the use of new media to expand the horizons of transmission religious messages through media. The volume of information immediately available through the internet means that for individuals the internet as a part of mediatised culture is “a world of unbounded curiosity, of argument, and of information, where anyone with a modem can… ask a question and receive an answer,” because there is no temporal constraint to accessing information and communication online.[[185]](#footnote-185) The digital affordances for access and entry pair with the deterritorialised nature of the internet to create a super-space for translocal social participation. It is the space in which Jewish diaspora communities can engage with each other and at the same time for individuals to interact to build stronger networked connections.[[186]](#footnote-186)

In the era of digital media, technical affordances have made accessing the internet an increasingly mobile and personal experience. The privacy that this personalisation offers means that the internet is a relatively low-consequence space for individuals both to build their identities and to seek answers from sources apart from face-to-face social encounters.[[187]](#footnote-187) At the same time, this privacy is mitigated by participation in the publically space of the internet, and leads to a different experience of mediatisation for ultra-orthodox Jews encounter trying to participate in network culture online.[[188]](#footnote-188) The internet appeals to the progressivity built into diaspora Judaism, even in its most conservative manifestations, and models have been proposed to harness the potential of the functional affordances of internet-enabled technology by combatting the appearance of secular content. This process has been referred to as “koshering” the internet, limiting the field of knowledge accessible by building search engines, social networks and other systems which are in line with Jewish moral ideology. The production of a kosher Jewish space online has allowed the Jews to simultaneously participate in digital media while maintaining control of the media produced, engaging in interplay between religious and media logic to make meaning.[[189]](#footnote-189) By adapting the ways that Jews use media affordances to religious laws and expectations, mediatisation allows for digital media to become a tool for the maintenance of more traditional communities.

The key aspect in the convergence of diasporic communities is that they are subjectively produced groups with looser cohesive solidarity, which are formed and reproduced to sustain a religious idea, rather than maintain a stable, universal religiosity outside of the native context. Although most Jewish communities share key features including texts like the Torah and Talmud as well as and cultural traditions including circumcision, the interactions and encounters with global others that diaspora communities undertake means that development and expressions of Jewish religiosity are diverse.[[190]](#footnote-190) The regulation of diasporic communities as an umbrella heading for deterritorialised Jewish peoplehoods is regulated through individual participation which enacts the image of communion and the performance of membership.[[191]](#footnote-191) The defining aspect of Jewish identity in the diaspora becomes a self-association with the community instead of a traceable ethnic religious identity. Jewish identity is mediated for individuals by their personal identification with the ethnic Jewish community, their perception of Israel as a homeland for the Jewish population, and their notion of quasi-connections which have an impact on the interests of the state of Israel.[[192]](#footnote-192) This necessitates a broader definition of Jewish geography which operates beyond the requirements of geo-spatial locality through interactions between the imagined community and cultures, and politics and physical geography of their hosts.

A new form of Jewish peoplehood has emerged in changes afforded by digital communication between individuals and between diasporic communities. Because identity is forged through interactions and the diasporic community is imagined, these connections become possible without immediate human interaction, and have changed social engagement in diaspora communities. The digitisation of media and communication have allowed diaspora communities to connect to transmit skills related to performing Jewish custom and culture to translocal populations motivating and enabling the participation of individuals in diaspora group-formation, and in Judaism without physical meetings of community members.[[193]](#footnote-193) The diaspora identity is developed with a connection to Israel, the imagined homeland in a deterritorialised space that forges collective connection through shared performances and practices for aspects of the religion including the celebration of holidays, weddings and life-cycle rites. The dispersed Jewish population operates in a multi-local capacity, with diverse communities connected through a shared narrative of dispersion allowing them to demarcate a shared narrative ground that becomes easily accessible through CMC.[[194]](#footnote-194) Diasporas connect individuals through physical engagement in local communities, but also into the broader trans-local community of diasporas by designating the field of communication for storytelling and ritual which promote a crystallisation of shared group identity apart from physical geography.[[195]](#footnote-195)

Diaspora communities are forged in spaces which are shared with the other and so must focus on maintaining Jewish collectivity.[[196]](#footnote-196) Facing increased assimilation into secular populations and a general decreased engagement with institutional Jewish religious bodies in the digital media era has made a new orientation towards Jewish identity primary. Creating a Judaism that is deterritorialised in a digital space operates above physical connection, and can address engaging social support for an umbrella group of Jewish populations.[[197]](#footnote-197) These communities attract and engage individuals by making instrumental networked connections which foster values like Jewish education, and caring for the sick and disadvantaged outside of personal relationships.[[198]](#footnote-198)

Diaspora cultures can become multilocal online with mediatisation influencing the adaption of religion for the internet as a new public venue.[[199]](#footnote-199) In mediatised cultural experience, multiple identities are played out through digital infrastructure in environments which bridge the divide between private and public by facilitating narrow-casting to defined social networks. Because of this Jewish identity can be interposed onto a private identity in the digital sphere, as an extension of Moses Mendelssohn’s concept for *haskalah[[200]](#footnote-200)* diaspora identity, “Be a Jew at home, and a Goy on the street,”[[201]](#footnote-201) by making a new mediated public online. The open access networks that are available on the internet to the diaspora, and to the Other makes social media the place to express new public religious identity, and to make connections to co-religionists because it can be personalised and is available to individuals.[[202]](#footnote-202)

Diaspora has become a form of social network which acts as an umbrella for networked sociality and communal forms that are based on the instrumental reciprocal address of needs.[[203]](#footnote-203) Because the internet is a deterritorialised space, CMC allow translocal communities to interact and to foster a sense of belonging through almost immediate communication transcending and temporal physical distance. In this way, the internet has been a tool to increase diaspora connections to the homeland community and to increase a feeling of immediacy in intradiaspora communication.[[204]](#footnote-204) For religious actors, online the intention of maintaining a diaspora identity through media supersedes the potential for secular influence effecting their religiosity. The creation of kosher internet sites, and CMC allows even conservative diaspora communities to make the most of technical affordances to foster belonging and religious identity.[[205]](#footnote-205)

## Religion in Network Sociality

As Esther Benbassa and Jean-Christophe Attias note, the place of the diaspora Jew is mediated between the simultaneous desire for an assimilated Jewish population able to operate seamlessly within host cultures and for a preservation of the distinct ethnic Jewishness that defined a pre-Diasporic population. In the 20th and 21st centuries, this mediation has become mediatised, with cultural practices of Jewish tradition, including torah and Talmud studies becoming embedded in the affordances of digital technology infrastructures to be accessed and edited by produsers online.[[206]](#footnote-206) The tension of individuals attempting to define a shared identity operates the cultural production of diaspora communities which act as nodes in a greater Jewish social network.

The “New Jew”[[207]](#footnote-207) living in the modern diaspora has become part of a global culture of vocal actors who are mobilised globally to engage with Jewish issues both internal and external to host cultures and countries.[[208]](#footnote-208) The diaspora identity operates as an umbrella concept to identify Jewish communities outside of Israel, by engaging the Jewish population with a connection to the land of Israel through a set of shared communication methods.[[209]](#footnote-209) In modern Judaism, the priority has been creating and continuing Jewish identity by facilitating the creation of a shared set of knowledge upon which to base communal discussion in a manner which mirrors the increased communication between diaspora communities facilitated by digital affordances.[[210]](#footnote-210) The communal diaspora identity involves looser connections to the imagined centre, as a deterritorialised network collectivity. In a global context of religious and media participation this fosters greater affordances for communitisation and connection than face-to-face interaction.[[211]](#footnote-211)

## Religion in Network Sociality: Chabad

The impression of the internet as a limitless field of knowledge and information is potentially discomforting to many orthodox and ultra-orthodox individuals and communities in the United States and in Israel. The lack of limits to access on the internet are an obstacle to proper Jewish practices for observant Jewish communities, and forces a paradoxical relationship between embracing technological affordances, and “building fences around the torah,” to mediate proper worship.[[212]](#footnote-212) Looking at the Chabad[[213]](#footnote-213) community is particularly interesting because of their externally oriented community sociality, which is mobilised in outreach to secular Jews and gentile populations. Chabad opens the boundaries of their Jewish social network to foster ease of identification with Judaism and to control the field of Jewish information available online.[[214]](#footnote-214) The adoption of new technology by an orthodox group demonstrates the ubiquity and utility of technological communication in fostering contemporary solidarity amongst dispersed populations.[[215]](#footnote-215)

Chabad participated in social networking through CMC, beginning their online identity in 1993 with the establishment of Chabad.org. The earliest Chabad.org utilised a bulletin-board system (BBS) for chat amongst users, and operated a repository of Chabad institutionally approved religious texts. The Chabad goal of increasing godliness in the world was enacted through CMC, with the embrace of technical affordances making the internet a space for spiritual networking, and to promote religious views.[[216]](#footnote-216) Chabad combined the responsibility to promote Jewishness through outreach with their responsibility to promote the transmission of their worldview and fundamental Jewish values.[[217]](#footnote-217)

Chabad’s use of CMC has allowed it to become an authoritative source for Jewish content online for a broader population than its orthodox community with their attitude of outreach extending to the adaption of the internet for religiosity. Chabad has exercised some authority over individuals in the construction of digital Judaism by holding the most comprehensive online compendium of Jewish resources. The imagined religious community that participates in Chabad.org social networking and that draws on Chabad as a religious resource encompasses a broad spectrum of diaspora Jews outside of Hasidic Chabad community. More liberal Jewish communities have also engaged with material provided by the Chabad network, with the translocal nature of the internet changing boundaries for social participation, accessible institutional materials are open to personal interpretation.[[218]](#footnote-218) By early 2010 Chabad.org had 350,000 subscribers to their body of religious content through CMC and social networking, and by 2013 claimed 3.4 million users per one month period with more than 30 million unique visitors annually.[[219]](#footnote-219) Mediatisation has changed communal engagement for diaspora communities with fields of meaning defined into new distribution networks. Although the Chabad material is designed as a resource for s specific community, it tops the list of resources for Jewish information online for all users.[[220]](#footnote-220)

The adaption of new media and CMC for orthodox religious communities is demonstrative of the flexibility of a network sociability to filter and control information flows that individualised access offers. Because access to the internet is achieved by individuals, the control of religious communities is rewritten into online social norms regarding the boundaries of using technology within public and private lives. Chabad’s desire to control the available media coupled with the cultural emphasis that they hold for personal experience and emotive aspects of religion have moulded the online Chabad experience into a hub keeper for both religious resources and community solidarity as a space for sharing social experience, and religious ideology. [[221]](#footnote-221) By providing similar information to those both inside and outside of the religious community Chabad promotes a dialogue and relationship with modern technology which plays on the new dynamic of media and religion in distributing information and meaning-making. Chabad online is a communicative space which supports relationships between members of the community through social network capacities including message boards and community-oriented sources of news while simultaneously being open to the participation and inclusion of other digital actors.[[222]](#footnote-222) Chabad expands upon the traditional methods of their “sacred past” and move religion into the contemporary through social outreach on the ground, and digitally to a wider audience than the pre-digital community could have accessed.[[223]](#footnote-223)

# Conclusions for the Digital Age: Religious Social Futures with the Internet

The rise of the internet and of new technologies which facilitate communication have diversified the relationships that individuals use to situate themselves amongst others: new social environments mean that a sense of belonging is now contingent on the participation of individuals in relationships where physical connections have become remote. By recognizing alternative forms of sociality in the contemporary religious situation, this paper calibrates sociality away from the importance of in-person interactions to the maintenance of solidarity through reciprocal digital means. Relationships have become a mobile orientation based on interactions which serve individual needs, and in service of these needs have made the undifferentiated relationships in communities less able to support members and so foster a sense of social cohesion devoid of in person interactions.

The impact of the digital age on the possibilities for sociability within a communicative field have made the contemporary experience of the global accessible through new socio-cultural space. The convergence of internet storage and search capacity with personal mobile communication technology meant that mediatised cultural exchanges of belief and meaning occur in a translocal super-space. The authority and social programs that earlier scholars of religion relied upon to define religion, including mediated access to texts and traditions and controlling populations through tight group cohesion has been made looser and more individual. The rise of network individualism promotes more specialized and instrumental relationship building promoting more reciprocal cohesion.

To be able to best approach the study of social interactions in the digital era, a consciousness of Marshall McLuhan’s famous aphorism “the medium is the message,”[[224]](#footnote-224) is indispensable. Not only has the development of digital technology and the new media changed the ways in which we communicate meaning, and bond with one another it has impacted the ways in which we form groups and bond. The freedom of access to the internet as a socio-cultural space has made it the platform for the development of more individualized social relationships that parallel the modern rise of the individual, and of purposive social operations, in ways that allow for interactions that could not be achieved before the manifold of spatial and temporal distance enacted by the digital. By studying religion and digital religion outside of the tradition of local community in the digital era new concepts of modern sociality can be addressed to religion, and can better explain how personalised and privatised religiosity forge solidarity and connections through interactive co-constructions of meaning.

## Problems for the Study of Digital Religion

Mediatised digital culture has rapidly become a significant component of the everyday in the last decade. The rapid development and dissemination of ICTs wrestle with economic challenges to developing a web friendly global infrastructure pale in comparison to the difficulties in developing a cohesive consciousness of digital technology amongst the “web immigrant” demographic for whom CMC has not always dominated the media sphere. This demographic faces not only the regulatory challenges to infrastructure access but also a discomfort with the instability of the web model when compared to print media.[[225]](#footnote-225) In approaching the future of the study of digital religion and network sociality the mediatised social experience of a “digital native” creates a significant new digital divide and dynamic between an emic and etic perspective on the internet as a social space. The adoption of digital communication technology into social is impeded not only by access to said technology but by the mass-literacy of a demographic population to utilize new media for sociality.

The focus of Western scholars on an economic digital divide ignores the jump to digital media infrastructure without wired technologies, and the vast development and distribution of mobile technology worldwide. The use of CMC for social gathering occurs worldwide, and employs the immediacy of access to information to promote cohesive communicative understandings, and to form group connections through networks. The change to a digital culture means that scholars for whom network sociality is a social reality, and who have not experienced research without the internet have different expectations of immediacy and access, as well as quantity of information. The almost infinite nature of the internet as an information resource is a stark contrast to the limitations pre-digital research, and the impact of inaccessible unknown elements. A digital native scholar on network sociality and the future of digital religion has the potential to develop new organizational strategies which process the digital information overload and deconstruct understandings of religion in new ways.

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74. Refers to the biological classification system of Carl Linnaeus, which posited that groups could be easily subdivided into more specific categories. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
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77. Refers to the building of community. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
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94. Andreas Hepp, *Cultures of Mediatization* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
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154. Hjarvard, *The mediatization of culture and society,* 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-154)
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157. Banalised religion refers to the reproduction of religious meaning and symbols in the everyday experience of the public sphere through mediatisation. Banal religion adapts mundane media productions to associations with existential and metaphysical concerns. (Hjarvard, *The mediatization of culture and society*, 128*.*) [↑](#footnote-ref-157)
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161. The media super-space refers to the social space created online through digital technology which is continually accessible, to multiple individuals through translocal practices and interactions. (Kennedy, "Conceptualizing Social Interactions in Networked Spaces,” 26.) [↑](#footnote-ref-161)
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163. Jansson, “Mediatization and Social Space,” 279. [↑](#footnote-ref-163)
164. Campbell, “Community,” 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-164)
165. A culturalist interpretation relies on the concept that representations of things are not simply reproductions, but also take part in the production of the object being represented. (Mark Jackson. "Cultural Turn." In Encyclopedia of Geography, edited by Barney Warf, 645-646. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2010. doi: 10.4135/9781412939591.n244.) [↑](#footnote-ref-165)
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210. Avi and Mittelberg, "Between Authenticity and Ethnicity,” 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-210)
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