

Texting and Christian Practice

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the practice of texting in various Christian contexts and why this practice has become so important. It shows that the adoption of mobile technology to promote and disseminate religious thoughts and practices is a form of religious shaping of technology and vice versa (Campbell, 2007). The chapter further gives a general overview of the practice of texting from different geographical contexts where Christian adherents and their leaders embrace text messaging in a wide range of religious and spiritual activities, as well as helping to create new ones. The chapter also gives an up-to-date account of current literature in religion and ICT. Lastly, it suggests further research directions on the possible social and spiritual dangers of texting to Christian living and practices.

INTRODUCTION

Texting (or text messaging) refers to the sending of a short typed message between mobile phones using the Short Message Service (SMS). The practice of texting has become trendy and overwhelmingly popular not only for personal and commercial purposes but also as an essential feature of communication involving all spheres of human life. Ever since texting began in 1992, it has almost replaced other forms of communication and this is attributable to the decrease in costs of texting as compared to the more traditional forms of communication such as letter writing and telephoning. Also, there is the increasing number of offers by mobile telecommunication companies that contribute to the attraction of using texts as the main mode of communication. More importantly, texting encourages creativity in language use and affords the user the opportunity to explore and develop imaginative ways of making computer mediated communication (CMC) work best for them. It also allows texters experiment with language in an informal and playful manner. This belief is gradually leading to the adoption of a 'language of CMC' or 'language of texting' as a genre of language and style unique to CMC (see Crystal 2006).

According to Gordon (2006), the cell phone (or texting), is a part of our popular culture as well as a tool of the public sphere, because 'on occasions, the ability of the individual to have access to cell phone may have a significant influence not only on personal choices and actions

but also on national and international event,' (p.45). And for individuals and institutions around the world, the constellation of mobile phones, personal computers, the internet and other computing objects have supported a complex set of religious and spiritual needs (Bell, 2006). And given the ways in which religious practices are intimately woven into the fabric of daily life in most parts of the world, it is hardly farfetched to imagine that new information and communication technologies (ICTs) might support a range of existing religious and spiritual activities, as well as helping to create new ones (p.141). Hence, text messaging and Christian practice has been a topic of interest to scholars researching into religion and technology, and interestingly, studies have shown that texting (or SMS) has been utilized for quick religious worship and for enhancing the Christian lifestyle (see Bell, 2006; Campbell, 2006; Chilwa, 2008).

'Christian practice' is defined here, as the totality of religious behaviour and attitude that conform to the beliefs, doctrines or faith of Christians. This will include worship, prayers, confessions, Bible studies etc. Scholarly studies have shown that religious practitioners have embraced CMC technologies to propagate religious values and practices (Ess, Kawabata & Kurosaki, 2007). Not only is mobile telephony and the Internet a trendy platform for Christian practices, it also provides an active and trusted medium for other religions like Islam, Hinduism and Judaism to disseminate their doctrines and enforce their beliefs (Fukamizu, 2007; Campbell, 2006). In their article: 'how the iPhone became divine...' Campbell and Pastina (2010), show that the mobile phone culture has become indispensable to religion. The study explores the significance of labeling of the *iPhone* as the 'Jesus phone' and demonstrates how religious metaphors and myth can be appropriated into popular discourse and help shape the reception of a technology.

OVERVIEW

The study of religion in the context of computer-mediated communication (CMC) began with the growth of the popularity of the Internet and mobile telephony. Dr. Heidi Cambell at Texas A&M University; Dr. Pauline Hope Cheong at Arizona State University, Tempe; and Christopher Helland at Dalhousie University, Halifax are among the leading experts in the field of religion and digital culture.

Campbell's (2005) *Exploring Religious Community Online* and *When Religion Meets New Media* (2010) are invaluable accounts of how religious practitioners and communities connect to their online and offline networks and the issue of religious shaping of technology and vice versa. These studies adopted the social shaping of technology (SST) approach (Zimmerman-Umbel, 1992) to explain the adoption of communication technology by religious adherents. This approach further studies how and why a community of users responds to a technology in a certain way and helps to identify what values or beliefs influence this negotiation. According to Campbell (2007), one application of SST is the 'domestication of technology.' 'Domesticating a technology means making choices about the meaning and practice of a technology within this sphere. Thus, a technology is shaped by the setting in which it lives and by the agents who utilize it. Religious user communities can be seen as a 'family of users' who create a distinctive 'moral economy' of social and religious

meaning which guides their choices about technology and rules of interaction with them...(p.192) . Helland's (2005) 'online religion as lived religion: methodological issues in the study of religious participation on the internet,' provides a roadmap that addresses methodological issues in the study of religion in the new digital platforms. Heidi Campbell had earlier carried out a review of research in CMC in her chapter contribution entitled: 'approaches to religious research in computer-mediated communication, published in *Mediating Religion: Studies in Media, Religion and Culture* (edited by Jolyon Mitchell & Sophia Marriage).

Although scholarly studies have concentrated on the use of the Internet for the spread and practice of world religions, a few have touched on the use of text messages to disseminate the Christian religion. Campbell's (2006) 'Texting the Faith: Religious Users and Cell Phone Culture,' (published in *The Cell Phone Reader. Essays in Social Transformation*, edited by A.P. Kavoori & N. Arceneau) appears to be the first major work that accounts for the various ways religious practitioners have applied the culture of texting to practice and disseminate their religious faith. Though this study does not necessarily focus on the Christian religion, it does give a significant general overview of the use of SMS in different religious contexts. A follow-up study by Campbell (2007) entitled: 'What Hath God Wrought? Considering how religious communities culture (or Kosher) the cell phone' provides a more comprehensive account of the religious use of text messaging in particular, exploring the emergence of the 'kosher' cell phone in Israel. Jews are said to be able to send text messages with a prayer or request to a rabbi, who then placed the note in Jerusalem's western wall, thus observing a centuries-old tradition (Katz 2005).

According to Heidi Campbell the influence of technology (e.g. mobile phone) on religion has become increasingly overwhelming:

From the Pope's daily religious text and prayer messaging services... to Hindus in Bombay avoiding quest at temples by sending prayers to Ganesh via SMS. For a small fee British Muslims can receive verses from the Koran and fulfill their religious duties to give alms to the poor through a 'TXT & Donate Islamic Prayer alert' (Biddlecombe, 2004). Religious groups have also become innovators, designing special phone features to enable religious devotion. Muslims can purchase handsets with a built in 'Mecca Indicator' that also reminds them of prayer times... A Taiwanese handset maker designed a phone dedicated to the Chinese goddess Matsu, which features a hologram of the goddess, religious chanting ring tones and is reportedly blessed in a special ritual at a Matsu temple. Yet the mixing of religion with the cell phone has also been controversial in some cases. SMS greetings replacing traditional visits from friends and family during Ramadan have received public criticism in the Middle East and Catholic Bishops in the Philippines have publicly denounced wireless confessional services accepting confession or offering absolution via SMS ... (2007: 191-2)

Particularly in the practice of Christianity, interesting studies and findings have revealed the roles of text messaging in the perpetuation of Christian culture. According to Roman (2005), the texting of religious thoughts not only spreads the Christian message, it integrates that message to the new culture of modern communication, and utilizing cell phone technology to promote Christian practices like evangelism is a form of mission-based marketing.

Citing the very words of Pope Paul VI, the use of texting for soul winning introduces a paradigm shift in presenting the Gospel starting where the people are. Thus, evangelizing through text messaging is then rather like 'walking gently into the culture and/or experience of others respecting what already is present in their lives' (p.29). In this context, religious texts are viewed as 'inputs of reflections,' offering encouragement and support to recipients and conveying divine blessing, words of religious affirmation and Bible quotes. Bruni (2003) reported that the Vatican launched a daily text message service in collaboration with *Telecom Italia*, and that over two million Christian faithful subscribed to the service. Charny (2004) also reported that in 2004, three major mobile service providers in the US supported the Vatican in providing daily SMS service to Catholic faithful. Under the service, subscribers received messages directly from Pope John Paul II in form of homilies, speeches and messages.

Ellwood-Clayton (2005) further describing the text culture among orthodox Catholics in Philippines identifies a 'local appropriation of religiosity enacted through folk *text* Catholicism' and how this is expressed through the 'text gospel' or 'barkada gospel' (p.254). 'Barkada' is a type of friendship cult whose members act as extended family to one another. Text exchanges among them often act as reminders of faith, love and friendship and tend to reinforce 'the good life' in spite of hardships. 'Thus, *barkada* gospel may be viewed as a form of 'emotional hospitality' and goodwill. Priests are also said to utilize text messages in their sermons and encourage their members to 'text God' (p.255). The author argues that regular text communication creates an independent form of religious community that is autonomous from the Catholic Church. Ananova (2003) also reveals that in the Philippines, Catholics sent confessions and received absolution via mobile phones and even after this practice was banned by the Vatican, it was still argued that giving electronic absolution without the embarrassment of having to face a priest was still better (Byrnes, 2011). Katz (2005) further finds out that a Papal 'thought of the day' SMS is available from the Vatican and transmitted in Italy, Ireland and U.K. Also, in Holland, the Catholic Church offers religious mobile ringtones to inspire spiritual reflection. 'The Lord is my Textmate' and 'Amazing Grace' ringtones are examples of ringtones widely used in the Philippines as part of the 'barkada gospel' (Ellwood-Clayton, 2005).

Genevieve Bell (2006) shows that the Australian Bible Society had begun to offer the Bible rendered in SMS text message format on a single take home CD-ROM. The CD is designed to be loaded on a computer and blue-toothed to a compatible cell phone and then broadcast to the user. Besides, the Bible was translated into the vernacular of SMS and of certain imaging of youth discourses. A text message service allowed mobile phone users to receive Bible passages directly to their handsets in Sidney. Chilwa (2008) examining texting among Pentecostal Christians in Nigeria, reveal that the SMS is a medium for Christians to demonstrate their commitment, express religious sentiments and to disseminate the Christian message. Chilwa's study further reveals that texting is used among Nigerian Christians to disseminate messages associated with faith-based pronouncements, invitations, prayer and well-wishing, admonition and assurance, appreciation and praise, season's greetings and general information and announcements. The texts below are examples of texts that are typical of Pentecostal Christians in Nigeria:

- (i) *where wil u be tonight 4cross over let it be in god's presence, come and receive power 2 succeed in 2014 @ rccg lord's doing parish 9pm til we crossover see u there*
- (ii) *don't mix night of great experience.come n recive mercy favor n d anointing 2live in d overflow.10pm @ rccg d lords doing*
- (iii) *grace n peace n mercy be2u n al urs in dis season of overflowing blessings welcome back to church 2morow 4 an encounter 8am.*

Thus, mobile telephony and communication space is clearly rich with spiritual possibilities, moral uplift and tools for devotion.

CURRENT SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE

New publications by Heidi Campbell e.g. *Understanding the Relationships between Religious Practice Online and Offline in a Networked Society* (2012) and *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (2013) are major milestones in the investigation of religious practices (including Christianity) in the various ICT contexts. The latter is an edited volume that assembles up-to-date findings from experts from key disciplinary perspectives. They offer 'a critical and systematic survey' of the study of world religions and new media and cover religious engagement with a wide range of new media forms such as mobile phones, video games, blogs and Second Life. Heidi Campbell who teaches telecommunications and media studies with special interest in religion and culture as well as internet and digital, mobile culture is also the Director of the *Network for New Media, Religion and Digital Culture Studies*. The Network is said to provide a platform 'for scholars, students and those interested in exploring topics and questions emerging at the intersections of religion, the internet and new, social and mobile media. The Network also 'offers an interactive space for researchers and others wishing to learn more about this growing research area to share related resources and highlight news items as well as events.' (See <http://digitalreligion.tamu.edu/>).

Cheong et al's (2012) *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture: Perspectives, Practices, Futures* and Cheong and Ess's (2012) *Religion 2.0? Relational and Hybridizing Pathways in Religion, Social Media and Culture* also bring authors together to examine the complex interaction between religion and CMC. The contributions center on core issues of religious understanding of identity; community and authority being shaped and (re)shaped by the communicative possibilities of Web 2.0. The authors address these questions through contemporary empirical research on how diverse traditions across the globe seek to take up 'the technologies and affordances of contemporary CMC; through investigations that place these contemporary developments in larger historical and theological contexts, and through careful reflection on the theoretical dimensions of research on religion and CMC.'

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

An online Christian website known as ‘Spiritual Whip’ recently posted an article entitled: ‘Perils of Text Messaging for a Christian.’ The writer fears that texting or forwarding Bible verses to female recipients via mobile phones can serve as bait for womanizers and ‘sexters.’ In a report by *zdnet.com*, the Pakistani Telecommunications Authority on September 2, 2013 ordered all mobile phone operators to discontinue all forms SMS and voice mail/chat rooms where subscribers text and chat anonymously with other subscribers. This measure was in order to safeguard ‘moral values of the society.’ In his article: ‘Online religion in Nigeria: the internet church and cyber miracles’ Chilwa (2012), also identifies the dangers of exclusive digital worship. One of such dangers is that it ‘endangers offline house fellowship system, which is viewed as the reproductive organ of the local offline church’ (pp. 734). Thus, exclusive texting as a form of Christian worship has its moral and spiritual dangers.

The above concerns are worthy of further investigations and provide a roadmap for future research on this topic. A lot of online articles and blogs have expressed the interest of their writers on the physical dangers of texting, such as those posed by texting and driving or texting while walking. So far, scholarly research investigations are yet to articulate the dangers of texting to religion or texting in Christian practice. Are there dangers really? We suggest further researches on the possible social, moral or spiritual dangers of texting to Christian living and practices.

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FURTHER READING

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KEY TERMS & DEFINITIONS

Texting: The act of composing and sending a short electronic message (maximum of 160 words) between two or more mobile phones. A sender of a text message is referred to as a *texter*.

Religion: A set of beliefs about the cause of nature, and purpose of the universe, especially when considered as the creation of a superhuman agency (or God), usually involving devotional and ritual observances, and often obtaining a moral code governing the conduct of human affairs (see *online Dictionary.com*)

Digital Religion: The practice of religion with the application of new media technologies.

Christian: (noun). A person who practices the Christian religion, the latter being a religion based on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. The term 'Christian' was first used in the Bible to refer to the disciples of Jesus Christ at Antioch in Acts 11.26.

Practice (noun): To live according to the customs and teachings of a religion (see *Merriam-Webster Online*)

Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC): Communication that takes place through the use of electronic devices, usually by individuals who are connected either online or a network connection using social software and interact with each other via separate computers.

Mobile Technology: Technology used for cellular communications.

Mobile phone (or cell phone): A device that can make and receive telephone calls over a radio link, while moving around a wide geographical area. This is possible by connecting to a cellular network provided by a mobile phone operator, allowing access to the public telephone network (see *Wikipedia, 2013*)