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# DISCOVERING THE INVISIBLE INTERNET

## METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF SEARCHING RELIGION ON THE INTERNET<sup>1</sup>

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In his well-known work, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Anthony Giddens speaks of the disembedding of social interaction from temporal and spatial conditions as a distinguishing feature of modernity. With the beginning of the modern era, he says, social space becomes increasingly independent of concrete places. Social interaction involves partners who do not share the same geographical space and whose communication is realized over spatial distances.<sup>2</sup> In discussing the transfer of rituals online, we seem to be confronted theoretically and empirically with the disembedding of ritual interaction from its traditional temporal and spatial conditions.

The acquisition of "ritual competence" and its normative implications is usually attached to the experience of the socially structured life-world (*Lebenswelt*).<sup>3</sup> Thus, ritual competence is a result of a learning process within a social community that requires regular participation in rituals and the gradual mastery of specific ritual knowledge. This knowledge is normally controlled by an institutionalized hierarchy. Here, the constitutive acts of communication gain their validity and traditionalizing power through an inter-subjective consensus, which already includes the participants' reflected reference to the life-world; and the acquisition of ritual competence implies the adoption of a collective system of values and beliefs.<sup>4</sup> The relevance of the recent transfer of ritual knowledge and elements of ritual performances into the context of the new Internet medium becomes clear if we consider the ritual theory of the Durkheimian School.<sup>5</sup> For Durkheim, the common experience of rituals was not only the basis of a religious community but also the foundation of society.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Heidi Campbell and Gernot Meier for their helpful contributions.

<sup>2</sup> See Giddens 1992, 17-29. I discuss the ambivalence of Giddens's metaphor of the disembedding of religious communities on the Internet in Krüger 2004.

<sup>3</sup> See Goffman 1967; Schütz & Luckmann, 1979:154-172, 293-313.

<sup>4</sup> See Habermas 1981, 182-228.

<sup>5</sup> See Dawson 2004, 75-76.

<sup>6</sup> See Durkheim 1925, 593-648.

This then begs the question: What is the role and significance of the Internet in imparting ritual knowledge? How do the communicative structures of the Internet change the transmission of ritual knowledge and ritual competence? Are Internet users in fact freed from all traditional barriers such as age, gender, education, and other similar personal qualifications, so that they now have equal access to ritual knowledge and the same opportunity to acquire ritual competence. And what are the communicative and social structures that are developed by online discussion forums and by individual homepages? How can Internet users construct norms to determine what is wrong and what is right in the context of complex ritual performances? Is the Internet a fully democratic or even anarchic medium in the field of religion – one that realizes an ideal of total equality and liberty, as Howard Rheingold claimed more than 10 years ago?<sup>7</sup> Can these processes of acquiring ritual online knowledge now be regarded as socially disembodied?

Broad theoretical concepts such as liberty or disembodiment may not help greatly in acknowledging the social changes of religion in times of religion going online. There are too many ideal implications behind these great concepts – some of these refer to Michael Heim's metaphysics of cyberspace.<sup>8</sup> When Christopher Helland asserts that "doctrines and teachings that were once centralized and controlled can now be openly challenged, contradicted, or ignored through a medium that is accessed by hundreds of millions of people every day,"<sup>9</sup> we have to ask what "openly" means in this context. The idea of overcoming social structures and hierarchies to realize the true equality of individuals is still a persuasive virtual utopia that stems from a long tradition of technical innovations bound to the idea of liberty (such as canals, trains, telegrams, radio, and so on).<sup>10</sup> These utopian ideas strongly reflect an emic religious perspective, as the pagan book author Lisa McSherry demonstrates: " ... anyone anywhere – without fear of discrimination or harassment by small minded neighbors ... can worship with others in Cyberspace."<sup>11</sup>

A metaphor like disembodiment may illustrate some hypothetical tendencies in Internet theory and also some methodological problems of empirical Internet research. With this in mind, I would like to discuss some empirical problems connected with exclusive online research after presenting some provisional results of a study of online discussion forums in the Wicca, witches, and neo-pagan esoteric fields. First, however, I propose to apply the

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<sup>7</sup> See Rheingold 1993.

<sup>8</sup> See Heim 1993.

<sup>9</sup> Helland 2004, 30.

<sup>10</sup> See Stegbauer 2001, 38-66; Connolly 2001.

<sup>11</sup> Cover of McSherry 2002.

sociology of knowledge as a methodological starting point for the empirical analysis of the religious Internet.

### *Sociology of Knowledge*

Thus, before I explore ritual discourse on the Internet, I would like to return for a moment to more general theoretical considerations. I am convinced that the study of religion and rituals on the Internet will benefit greatly if we follow the old advice of Max Scheler, Peter L. Berger, and Thomas Luckmann and consider the sociology of knowledge as the theoretical and methodological starting point of any sociology of religion:<sup>12</sup>

The task of the sociology of knowledge is the analysis of the social forms of knowledge, of the process by which individuals acquire this knowledge and, finally, of the institutional organization and social distribution of knowledge... The consequence for the sociology of religion as a discipline is clear: the sociology of religion is an integral and even central part of the sociology of knowledge. Its most important task is to analyze the cognitive and normative apparatus by which a socially constituted universe (that is, 'knowledge' about it) is legitimated.<sup>13</sup>

When Karl Mannheim created the idea of sociology of knowledge in the 1920s, his perspective focused mainly on different social classes and the conditions of their social and ideological knowledge of the world (*Weltanschauung*).<sup>14</sup> The sociology of knowledge tries to understand the epistemology of individuals and social classes – what do people believe about how the world is? And how do people gain this knowledge? It is obvious that we can apply this question to the matter of religious world views and ritual knowledge and competence as well. In fact, the ideas of religion and the experience of rituals are most important elements of sense-establishing systems.<sup>15</sup> The great advantage of the methodological approach of the sociology of knowledge is its double reflexivity: we not only consider the conditions of knowledge of our human objects of investigation but also the conditions of our own knowledge. The recent discussions in cultural studies with regard to orientalism have demonstrated that findings within the humanities and social sciences do not dispose of a privileged point of view but depend on specific social and cultural conditions.<sup>16</sup> Describing and analyzing new forms and conditions of religious communication may suffer from our

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<sup>12</sup> See Scheler 1963, 33-35; Berger & Luckmann 1969, 69-73.

<sup>13</sup> Berger & Luckmann 1969, 69.

<sup>14</sup> See Mannheim 1970.

<sup>15</sup> Berger & Luckmann 1994, 77, 98-138.

habitual patterns of recognizing religion, such as focusing on religious ideas or the classification of established religious groups.<sup>17</sup> The reflection of our own scientific, cultural, or even theological epistemology is at the center of the empirical approach led by the sociology of knowledge. This is the theoretical background to the methodological considerations that follow.

### *Wiccan Rituals on the Internet*

In July 2002, a group of four sociologists, theologians, and religious historians (including the author) started a three-year research project on the topic of rituals on the Internet at Heidelberg University. While Kerstin Radde is analyzing the personal homepages of religious individuals, I am focusing on discussion forums.<sup>18</sup> It is not accidental that we chose the Wicca movement as the subject of investigation, since the traditional Wicca movements (like the Gardnerian or Alexandrian Wicca) are structured by a very rigid order of precedence that is based on gradual initiation and instructions on ritual knowledge, and even exclusions from higher rituals. Further, "... among contemporary neo-pagan and Wiccan groups, ritual is central to both religious worship and creative expression"<sup>19</sup>. Consequently, the transfer of ritual knowledge on the Internet makes this competence in Wicca rituals available even to those who were not previously initiated into the movement: "Knowledge becomes separated from a community within a particular time and place, and for teens there is no need to learn from their 'elders'; they are able to create their own form of Witchcraft or Paganism."<sup>20</sup> From the very beginning, a larger proportion of the members of Wicca have been known as eclectic practitioners; they are not part of any specific Wiccan craft and are often not part of a coven. Instead, these practitioners draw upon several sources to form their own individualized and innovative religious practices.<sup>21</sup> The examples of self-confident teenagers and women offering neo-pagan ritual and spiritual knowledge in the media point to the emergence of highly individualized witches. On the comprehensive homepage of the U.S. individual Wicca

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<sup>16</sup> See Maasen 1999, 45-50 .

<sup>17</sup> Kieserling 2004, 152-169.

<sup>18</sup> See her forthcoming article in *Online 1/2 (2005)*. We are a part of a newly established Collaborative Research Centre on the *Dynamics of Rituals* with 16 associated projects. See <http://www.ritualdynamik.uni-hd.de/en/index.htm>.

<sup>19</sup> Magliocco 1996, 93.

<sup>20</sup> Berger & Ezzy 2004, 177.

<sup>21</sup> See Cunningham 1988, 2002; Lewis 1996, 86-87.

practitioner, Isamara, Cyber Wicca is even presented as a new branch among the numerous traditions of Wicca. Isamara defines Cyber Wicca as follows:

Cyber Wicca is less of a tradition, than in the traditional sense of the craft. The Internet is the ultra-modern age of Wicca, and more and more people are turning to it in their quest to practice The Old Religion. It is the ideal medium for the solitary or eclectic practitioner, to learn from and communicate with others in the craft. It is also ideal for those people unable to meet with and practice with others, and indeed for those who for various reasons, need to remain anonymous. There are now many groups on the Internet that take part in live play and group rituals. This is accomplished through synchronized live imagery and the typed word. When you think about it, magic holds no boundaries; a person practicing in England using the same tools, method, and intent, synchronized with a person in America, should and now do, work together in common goals.<sup>22</sup>

That the acquisition of ritual competence loses much of its social integration through use of the Internet is also apparent in the striking example of the ritual of self-initiation that was invented by the Wicca practitioner David Sands in 1997, and which can now be found on many Wiccan Web sites.<sup>23</sup> Thus, initiation refers only to a new state of spiritual identity and not to a social community of witches. The study of some Wiccan practitioner homepages seems to indicate that this religion is now highly individualized. The ritual knowledge for initiation, now available to everyone on the Internet, does not seem to be controlled by a social hierarchy.

However, while we have observed a great individualization of the Wiccan religion and practice through the use of the Internet, there are also new forms of community with regard to the Wiccan religion. In this case, the so-called ritual communities are not constituted by the collective performance of rituals, but by communication on rituals, which generally leads to a more differentiated depiction of the recent developments in the Wiccan religion and its periphery. Here, the recent works of Helen Berger and Douglas Ezzy on developments in contemporary neo-paganism and witchcraft in the U.S. and Australia indicate a more complex situation that contradicts the wide-spread assumption of a general individualization and simplification of religion. The Internet is used to get in touch with other witches, to exchange experiences, and even to become an 'instant expert' with significance for other members of the group. Thereby, the participation in online communities provides young witches with an important sense of belonging to a group of people who share similar beliefs and practices. A

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<sup>22</sup> See *Moonlight Magick* from <http://wiccachile.tripod.com/moon/others.htm>.

<sup>23</sup> See for example website of *Wicca for All People* at <http://www.angelfire.com/super/wiccaforallpeople/selfinitiation.html>.

number of Berger's and Ezzy's interviewees also reported to have found real life contacts.<sup>24</sup> Although Wiccan hierarchy tends to be increasingly in the minority, particularly among young people, Berger argues that we can observe a high homogeneity of conviction and ritual practice among witches.<sup>25</sup> In comparison with the 1960s and 1970s – when neo-pagan thought was largely restricted to scattered solitary practitioners or covens – books, workshops, magazines, television, and the Internet strongly support the standardization of ritual practice today: "The Internet and attendance at festivals have led to an increasing similarity among adherents in their ritual practices, interpretations, and magical acts."<sup>26</sup>

I would like to use my own project on the online ritual discourse in the field of Wicca and witches to illustrate some methodological problems in our Internet research. In 2003 there were no less than five larger, German discussion forums explicitly in the field of Wicca, witches, and neo-pagan esoteric, with more than 200 registered users and more than 30 contributions per day.<sup>27</sup> In addition to these explicit religious discussion forums, there were also some special sections on witches in the common discussion forums of women's and youth online magazines such as *Bravo* and *Brigitte*.<sup>28</sup> In spring 2003, I began to analyze a sample of 22 discussions on rituals using a methodical combination of communication analysis, qualitative contents analysis, and group discussions.

The provisional results of this analysis indicate ambivalent structures in the online ritual discourse. On the one hand, we can clearly recognize that there is no monolithic religious institution that controls ritual knowledge – every religious individual can express his or her thoughts and ideas, and many people actually do. On the other hand, however, we can see that the online discourse establishes rules of communication and certain rules of the concrete forum's community. While some discussions on rituals are quite tolerant and appreciative of the creativity of others in designing rituals, most discussions are normative: different opinions on how to perform a ritual correctly lead to controversial disputes.

Bearing Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson in mind, communication always includes aspects of content and social relation.<sup>29</sup> So, beside rhetoric and substantive strategies – such as personally devaluing other users or referring to 'classic' Wiccan authors – the presentation of discursive agency plays an enormous role in these discussions. New hierarchies of ritual

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<sup>24</sup> Berger & Ezzy 2004, 186.

<sup>25</sup> Berger & Ezzy 2004, 175-178.

<sup>26</sup> Berger 1999, 126. Berger traces two processes that are characterized by normative isomorphism (this is professionalisation of the Wiccan community) and mimetic isomorphism (this depends on the uncertainty of Wiccan practitioners). See Berger 1999, 123-130.

<sup>27</sup> See for example <http://www.hexen-online.org>.

<sup>28</sup> See for example the *Magie und Mystery Board* at <http://www.bravo.de>.

<sup>29</sup> See Watzlawick & Beavin & Jackson 1967, 51-54.

competence emerge, with the social status of all registered users represented by a symbolic graduation system that takes account of the number of articles they have written. On the popular Hexen-Online forum, your rank is reflected by symbols of plastic, silver or golden cauldrons.<sup>30</sup> The individual user is automatically integrated into a system of religious and social status that structures the online community in a manner that reflects the way members of real Wicca covens are part of a complex graduation system. The significance and the weighting of statements in those discussions depend on the visible social status of the communication partners. Nicknames, pictures, and the special status of the moderator or webmaster are further aspects of social relations.

In summary, we have to see that ritual knowledge is not totally disembodied in the online ritual discourse. Where old structures disappear, new structures and hierarchies emerge in discussion forums in the process of acquiring ritual competence. There is no single authority controlling the ritual discourse, but each discussion forum has a complex hierarchy of authority and discursive agency.<sup>31</sup> However, these provisional results from the contents analysis of discussion forum communication are limited. To know more about the religious people behind them, we have to better understand the structures of online communication processes.

### *The Invisible Aspects of Religion Online*

In this regard, however, we are confronted with some empirical difficulties, which my classical empirical field study hinted at. In 2003 and 2004, I conducted eleven qualitative interviews among twelve users of witchcraft, Wicca, and neo-pagan esoteric discussion forums. I became aware of many of the empirical problems of previous exclusive online research during my field work. Acknowledging the limits to our conclusions on postmodern religion and religious people derived purely from online research may help us to improve our current research methods.

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<sup>30</sup> See <http://www.hexenboard.de/hexenboard/index.php>.

<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, in recent years we have been able to observe a strong tendency on German language Web sites to institutionalize these learning processes of ritual knowledge. It is not accidental that the structure of witches' schools resembles examples from popular media. Indeed the schools of witches vary from *Harry Potter's* interactive *Hogwarts Online* (<http://hogwartsonline.de/unterricht.html>), *manga-witch-schools* (<http://www.magical-hexenschule.de.tt/>), to explicit commercialized schools (<http://www.8ung.at/foundation/hs/hexenschule.html> or).

*Technical Selection Effects of Searching Religion*

The basic parameters of any empirical research are the validity and reliability of the material that has been collected by the researcher. The reliability is dependent on trustworthy research methods. Will our methods lead to the same results if we repeat our study? Or do our results depend to a large extent on unclear factors, such as the difference between male and female interviewers or certain selection effects? The validity reflects the relation between theoretical concepts and our empirical observations. Do we see what we are supposed to see?<sup>32</sup>

In systematically considering the importance of both the validity and reliability criteria in our Internet related research, by far the most important aspect appears to be the problem of selection effects. This problem refers to a simple and naive question: what *do* we see? While this question is a fundamental problem in ethnographic and sociological research, it is even more severe with regard to Internet research. Computer mediated communication (CMC) on the Internet constitutes hyper reality – thus, we do not have direct access to the social and personal reality of our empirical field. In addition to social and cultural selection effects that depend on, for example, our gender or our own religious convictions, the hyper reality of the Internet is only accessible through some technical filters that we, as researchers, cannot control. Therefore, we have to become aware of what we *can* see.

Leaving the initial site of our Internet Explorer or Netscape Navigator requires a selection. In most cases, talking about religion on the Internet means to talk about religion on the World Wide Web but we have to acknowledge the fact that there are other highly interesting aspects of the Internet for searching religion. The Usenet, for example, includes more than 100,000 newsgroups with about two million articles emerging every day.<sup>33</sup> This alternative "community" is proud to differ in behavior and style from the ordinary World Wide Web.<sup>34</sup>

Another basic difficulty is connected with the so called deep Web. The deep Web covers parts of the Internet that are not registered by the robot programs of search engines because of access denials by the providers or technical restrictions. Most parts of the deep Web are probably data collections that dynamically form Web sites after a concrete request by a user (as in Web shops). The deep Web is supposed to contain up to 500 times as much information

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<sup>32</sup> See Friedrichs 1990, 100-103; Knoblauch 2003, 162-168.

<sup>33</sup> See <http://www.usenet.com/index.htm>.

<sup>34</sup> Smith 2001.



as the surface web. Recently, some smaller search engines such as Completeplanet.com and Turbo10.com have tried to fill this gap by expensive technical means.<sup>35</sup>

If we do not rely on empirically problematic pre-selections (link collections, newspaper articles, and so on), we depend on the results of search engines. And let's be pragmatic: we depend on the first pages of results from search engines and we have to recognize that ordinary search engines, such as Google or Altavista, capture only 30–40 % of the surface web. Using search engines for Web catalogues that include substantive commentaries by Web editors produces a small number and low topicality of results: the Open Directory Project, for example, 'only' includes about four million Web sites.<sup>36</sup> Thus, we depend on the page ranking technology that was first introduced by Google in 1999: about 25 different criteria determine the rank at which a search result is placed. The most important aspects are the number of external links and the term vector (distribution and appearance of the requested term on a site). Metatags and keywords now play a minor role since they supported the manipulation of search engines by implanting masses of popular terms on Web sites.<sup>37</sup> But different search engines use different ranking preferences and in some cases they even depend on lucrative contracts between search engine providers and the owners of Web sites.

A small experiment illustrates the differences of ordinary search engines: searching for the term "religion" on Google places the Religion-Online.org Web site first in some 18 million research results. This site offers dozens of links to addresses on the Web, mostly Christian related, and is provided by Rev. William F. Fore, president of the World Association for Christian Communication. Asking for "religion" on Altavista puts the same site in sixth place and Yahoo even ranks it 12th.<sup>38</sup>

The substantial validity and quality of research engines is at least questionable and in many cases unsatisfying.<sup>39</sup> Of course, we will always find "something" – but neither do we know why we found a certain Web site nor what else is "out there". Finding Web sites by using the external links on a previous Web site may cause the problem of cohort effects: Web sites that refer to each other are supposed to be similar, while others might be excluded.

So what can we do to improve reliability in the first steps of our online research – in the selection of the empirical material? First, it is necessary to explore the way data is collected in the research report – the more transparent this process description is, the easier it is to trace

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<sup>35</sup> Griesbaum & Bekavac 2004, 40-49.

<sup>36</sup> Griesbaum & Bekavac 2004, 37-39.

<sup>37</sup> See @-WEB <http://www.at-web.de/google/g-deutsch.htm#ra>.

<sup>38</sup> Enquiry done on 01/20/2005. See website of *religion-online.org* at <http://www.religion-online.org>. Information on Fore can be found at: <http://www.religion-online.org/forebio.htm>.

<sup>39</sup> Griesbaum & Bekavac 2004, 45-49.

undesirable selection effects. Second, as long as we do not dispose of our own search agents, the combination of different ordinary search engines (such as Google), special search engines (for example, for searching the deep Web), offline literature, and tips given by religious informants might increase the reliability of our research instruments and decrease the selection effects caused by dependence on one single search instrument.

### *Social and Cultural Selection Effects of Religion Searches*

While the aspects of technical selection effects mainly refer to the reliability of our data, there are some more difficulties related to the problem of validity: do we really find what we are looking for? In dealing with religious expressions of individuals or non-institutionalized "movements" on the Internet, our habitual categories of "membership" are inappropriate and misleading. In recent years, the problem of Western conceptions of religion and membership of religions raised an ongoing discussion in cultural studies on applying analytic patterns derived from institutionalized (Christian) churches to other cultural hemispheres or new forms of religion.<sup>40</sup> Notwithstanding the fact that the Internet offers the opportunity to trace "invisible religion", the epistemological difficulty caused by our searching devices on the Internet is even more severe than in ordinary empirical research. Feeding the search engine with a defined search term such as "Wicca" or "witch" means that we – as researchers – define a certain religious system. The selection effects caused by our search terms are quite significant – consider, for example, that many witches today do not regard themselves to be a part of the Wiccan movement. But adopting an emic perspective on the question of what defines a certain religion will inevitably lure us into even deeper dilemmas: in many cases of non-institutionalized religions, we can observe a vigorous struggle for the right definition of a particular religion – a definition that includes some and excludes other believers.<sup>41</sup>

What can we do? We just have to try to avoid selecting our material by religious belief systems. Instead, we can try to analyze what people are doing in CMC, regardless of their beliefs. In my own research project, for example, I selected a wide range of discussion forums that dealt with rituals in the field of witches, neo-paganism or magic (the topic of the research project). In seeking people there who were interested in being interviewed, I did not ask for

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<sup>40</sup> Instrumental for these academic discourses have been Luckmann's *Invisible Religion* (1967) and Said's *Orientalism* (1978).

”witches” or Wiccan believers, but for people who were talking about rituals on these forums. As a result, half of my interviewees did not consider themselves witches but druids, (neo-) pagans, and curious beginners. Searching for a ”witch” would have required a definition of what a witch is and would have excluded many of those who communicate on witch rituals. Thus, I could learn much about communication, patchwork ideas, and individual practice, but not about a specific religious belief system. This method might also avoid the dominating focus on religious ideas and dogmas – typical in philological religious studies – in favor of a stronger consideration of religious practice and rituals.

### *Invisible Aspects of Communication and Online Community*

Another fundamental problem with online research is our limited view of CMC processes on the Internet. We are only able to recognize a small part of the different aspects of online communication.

The first problem is that we do not *see* every act of communication in the discussion forums. We never see what ”guests” (inactive persons who are not registered as a member of a certain online community) are doing there. From some forums that offer online statistics on members and guests, we know that there are actually large proportions of guests who presumably just read the contributions on the forum.

From my own experience of forums and my later interviews, I now know that I also underestimated the discursive power of the moderator and the webmaster, since some acts of communication are simply not visible for later analysis. Moderators shift discussions from one section to another, not only blocking discussions so that they cannot be continued, but also deleting complete discussions. One of my interview partners reported that there had been a vibrant discussion on angels on a witches’ discussion forum and that after a few days the webmaster interfered and deleted the entire topic because the supposedly ”Christian” theme of angels did not fit his neo-pagan interpretation of witches. So, if you want to stay a member of a certain Web community – maybe because you appreciate its extensive online facilities or its special atmosphere – you have to adapt.

This point leads directly to the aspect of social relations in online communication. We can only gain a limited understanding of social structures in online communication by analyzing

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<sup>41</sup> Of course, these struggles can be seen as the first steps toward institutionalization. See, for example, the recent debate on the ”bastardization” of the Wiccan movement as part of the ”Keep Wicca Traditional Ribbon

the textual and symbolic contents of homepages or discussion forums: some virtual communities, such as discussion forums or multi-user dungeons (MUDs), are proud of their exclusive culture. The lack of face-to-face communication means newcomers and leaders both acquire and use symbols (such as the cauldrons) that reflect their power and status. Textual and technical means can be used to struggle for power in the online community.<sup>42</sup> New social structures and hierarchies emerge: "MUD users experience a redefinition of social inhibitions; they do not experience the annihilation of them."<sup>43</sup> Rather than a general assumption of equalization, we can discover the emergence of new hierarchies, behavior rules, and different social roles for insiders, newbies and "wannabe witches", for example.<sup>44</sup> However, Lorne Dawson argues: "We need to know more about the qualitative character of online relationships and the actual performance of so-called virtual communities."<sup>45</sup> With regard to the social relation aspect of online communication, there is a "virtual blackout cloaking interaction"<sup>46</sup> caused by our complete lack of knowledge of the social context of religious Internet users from pure online research. We can hardly acknowledge the significance of the religious online world for single users (are they single users?) since we do not know whether online community participants also interact offline with each other. Are they single individual practitioners or active members of an offline religious community? Immanent content analysis of discussion forums and Web sites only provides a diffuse picture of *why* people get involved in Internet communication. In my later interviews, I recognized that religious communication and the acquisition of ritual knowledge only reflect part of the participant's personal motivation for joining a discussion forum. All my interview partners stated that they were interested to meet other witches to establish a regular get-together or to perform rituals together – at least at the great feasts of the year. Some already did so and were active coven members. For several of my interview partners, these social aspects were clearly more important than religion: "People use the Internet in ways that are in continuity with or augment their offline social lives."<sup>47</sup>

Further, in line with the Durkheimian paradigm, the Wiccan book author, webmaster, and practitioner Lisa McSherry opposes all those interpretations of online religious practices as a mere indication of individualization with regard to her own online coven: "Doing ritual, no

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Campaign" on the Internet: <http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/Square/7290/>.

<sup>42</sup> See McSherry 2002, 76-80.

<sup>43</sup> Reid 2001, 112. Also see Reid 2001, 111-120.

<sup>44</sup> See Paccagnella 1997, 5; Lövheim 2004b, 68-71; Stegbauer 2000, 29-34

<sup>45</sup> Dawson 2004, 78.

<sup>46</sup> See Smith 2001.

<sup>47</sup> Dawson 2004, 79. Also see Dawson 2004, 77-81.

matter how small or simple, is a powerful way to build community. Each time you work together magically with other coven members, you add to the group mind and the dynamics of the coven's structure."<sup>48</sup>

### *The Context of Internet Usage*

The Internet is no insular medium: it is a medium in the context of other media. To state the significance of religion on the Internet means to know how many people use the Internet for religious purposes, what they are doing there, and what significance the Internet has for them in comparison with other media. Do users only join one religious discussion forum? Do they use a number of other Internet communication facilities (chats/MUDs)? Do they prefer to visit representative homepages or discussion forums? What can we say about the fluctuation of users? And what significance does the Internet have in comparison with books, television, magazines, and – of course – personal religious experiences?

The first steps to analyze this have been undertaken by the Pew Internet and the American Life Project.<sup>49</sup> Their study from 2001 (with data collection until September 10, 2001) showed that 25% of U.S. Internet users have benefited from the Internet for spiritual or religious purposes on at least one occasion. Most treated the Net as "vast ecclesiastical library", and the most active online religion surfers (several times a week for spiritual purposes) also participate most actively offline in their faiths (strong believers, often praying, attending religious services).<sup>50</sup> The second study from 2004 highlighted that as many as 64% of U.S. Internet users "have done things that relate to religious or spiritual matters" at least one time. However, their sensational representative results also include "religious matters" such as sending an online greeting card at Christmas, reading news accounts about religious events and affairs, or sending/receiving/forwarding e-mails with spiritual content.<sup>51</sup> In contrast to the Pew Project, a recent German representative study of personal homepages indicates that religious content and religious individual presentations have no statistical significance on German homepages.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> McSherry 2002, 75.

<sup>49</sup> See <http://www.pewInternet.org/index.asp>.

<sup>50</sup> Larsen 2001, 6-22.

<sup>51</sup> Hoover & Schofield Clark & Rainee 2004, 4-5. Including aspects like Christmas cards and *receiving* e-mails makes the validity of the Pew project results partly questionable.

<sup>52</sup> See Misoch, 2004, 155-165.

However, Stewart Hoover, one of the leading authors of the Pew Project, also proposes a qualitative approach toward the use of different modes of engagement with the media. In a study among 62 families, his research team analyzed their experiences in the media (the understanding and interpretation of media texts and objects), interaction about the media (social relation for solidarity, resistance, and so on), and accounts of the media (on media use in their cultural and social context).<sup>53</sup> A specialization on the religious topic is still needed.

In the context of the Wiccan and neo-pagan tradition, we can dispose of some isolated findings on the religious use of media. The empirical field of what we term "Wicca" has changed completely within the last 10 years: Even at the very beginning, Gerald B. Gardner (1884-1964) and Alexander Sanders (1916-1988) – who are considered the founding fathers of all modern traditions of the Wiccan movement – published books and appeared on television talk shows in the 1950s and 1960s, although other Wiccan practitioners rejected them for this, viewing it as a violation of their vows to secrecy. Nowadays, however, the theme of magic and witchcraft has become really popular, especially in the U.S. and European media. Internationally broadcast U.S. television series like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Charmed*, and *Sabrina* only reflect the diffusion of neo-pagan knowledge and magical practice in popular media.<sup>54</sup> However, we have to take into account that there are totally different reception patterns here, as Lynn Schofield Clark showed in her excellent study on the reception of "supernatural" phenomena on electronic media. She identified five types of teenage media users: their attitudes towards alternative religion and spiritual issues presented in popular media range from admiration to rejection, with imitation and skepticism in between.<sup>55</sup>

Besides electronic media, books and magazines still have an enormous significance in spreading alternative religious ideas. Authors like Silver Ravenwolf, Starhawk, or the popular German witch, Thea, create a mixture of neo-pagan esoteric practices (from healing stones to astrology), a simplified version of Dianic Wicca, and some propositions for rituals and patterns for individual ritual design in their books and articles, and on their Web sites.<sup>56</sup> All of my interview partners owned at least a few popular or specialized books on witches and Wicca. Considering the fact that 25% of U.S. teens watch more than *five* hours of television a

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<sup>53</sup> See Hoover 2003, 13-15.

<sup>54</sup> See Schofield Clark 2003, 47-74. The influence of *Harry Potter*, *Sabrina*, and *Charmed* on the homepage of the witch, Skalay, illustrates the significance of popular media events for (post-)modern witches (see [http://www.skalay.de/Frame: Was ist eine Hexe?](http://www.skalay.de/Frame:Was_ist_eine_Hexe?), retrieved on 25.01.2005). For studies on *Buffy*, *The Vampire Slayer* see *Slayage. International Journal of Buffy Studies* (See <http://www.slayage.tv/>).

<sup>55</sup> See Schofield Clark 2003, 95-180.

<sup>56</sup> Thea had a column in *Astrowoche*, an esoteric German magazine, in which she offers new rituals every week; Starhawk and Ravenwolf are famous for their books (Ravenwolf 2003; Starhawk 1978; Thea 2000).

day, and only 5% of the same age group spend more than *one* hour per day on the Internet, Lynn Schofield Clark cautions against overestimating the religious significance of the Internet for youths.<sup>57</sup> Yet, in their study among young pagans, Helen Berger and Douglas Ezzy convincingly conclude that the Internet plays a relevant role for religious minorities in the context of other media: "However, the Internet is part of a larger process by which teenage Witches explore and participate in Witchcraft."<sup>59</sup>

We are not able to answer these important questions about personal media preferences and the individual significance of the religious Internet without asking the users directly. What we can do, is to take the special media history of a religion or religious movement into account in order to better understand the role of the Internet for those people. In the early 1990s, for example, neo-pagan and esoteric platforms were constituted on the Internet in the same way that many other special interest groups use Internet newsgroups, newsletters, and discussion forums. This new medium continued the well-proven communication facilities of the 1970s electronically. The widely scattered members of the different Wiccan covens had exchanged their ideas on rituals and on social items in simple (real mail) newsletters since then.

But here again, a historical treatment of media in certain religious (or non- religious) communities must circumspectly avoid ideal implications. Presenting a history of modern media – in order to analyze the relation between media and religion – Lynn Schofield Clark introduces the paradigm of "protestantization" that symbolizes "culturally dominant values – a set that includes individualism, freedom, pluralism, tolerance, democracy, and intellectual inquiry – has its roots in the Protestant Reformation and its challenges to the authority of religious institutions."<sup>60</sup> In doing so, she introduces not only a paradigm of description but also implies the reception of every new media, such as the Internet, closely bound to the ideals of Protestant values and the American culture. This empirical approach might be quite problematic.

### *Identity*

We could consider using technological methods and statistics to gain some better information on user preferences. But who are the users? Even if we could get information on single IP-

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<sup>57</sup> See Schofield Clark 2003, 14-17

<sup>59</sup> Berger & Ezzy 2004, 176.

<sup>60</sup> Schofield Clark, 2002, 7. Also see *ibid.* 7-14.

addresses – we do not usually have this knowledge – we would find out more about the computers than the human beings – and they could even be located in a public library or university. Identifying single users by nicknames appears to be difficult, too – nicknames replace anonymity (“anonymity” = “no name”) but they only represent the ideal self or, in the worst cases, a faked avatar identity.<sup>61</sup> We never know who it is. But we know from Internet research that faking your personal identity or improving your profile in a discussion forum, for example, is very popular, and even required to a degree. The large quantity of people or contacts available on the Internet requires the presentation of a somewhat unique and attractive character – for some users, the Internet becomes a multi-optional space for trying ludic identities.<sup>62</sup> Gender swapping, making yourself younger, “pushing up” your religious biography, and using attractive photographs can almost be regarded as normal. To be attractive as a communication partner, your personal presentation has to be attractive. Especially on private homepages, users tend to gain social acceptance by constructing an ongoing personal presentation on this “bounded region”.<sup>63</sup>

In the course of my interviews, I heard of a male user in the German discussion forum Hexen-Online.org who used about 15 different nicknames/characters in this forum. This user created a great number of artificial discussions among his own virtual personalities in the forum – he asked questions and answered them by himself. When his game was revealed, most users thought that he was suffering from a mental disorder. But I believe that his behavior as a multiple personality user (MPU) is in line with the rationality of online identity in discussion forums – he could artificially show, by his faked social relations, that he was popular and that people talked to him. He could also produce multiple contributions without arousing suspicion in order to receive a higher symbolic grade in the online community. Of course, this example is extreme, but it demonstrates the general problems of identifying religious individuals on the Internet.

### *The Medium*

In my view, these difficulties of empirical Internet research show that it is a fundamental necessity to consider the very special conditions of communication on the Internet. Many

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<sup>61</sup> See Gallery 2000, 71-75.

<sup>62</sup> See Vogelsang 2000, 246-250. Although the construction of identity at first glance seems to be independent of the off-line look, gender, age, and race, O’Leary recently contends that the physical (artificial) construction of online identity and its attraction depends in many cases on bodily features. See O’Leary 2004, 56-57.



Internet theoretists have pointed out that the Internet has lost the hierarchical structure of the book market, so that individuals can now publish their individual religious ideas. This is true and there is no doubt that this is a great opportunity for our research in the study of (invisible) religion. But we should not forget that the Internet medium itself involves some new special conditions of communication. As the Toronto School of Communication – following Harold A. Innis, Marshall McLuhan, and Joshua Meyrowitz – has emphasized, the effects or conditions of the medium are stronger than the concrete contents of communication.

The sociology of knowledge asks for exactly these social conditions in the acquisition of knowledge and of communication. One of the Internet's most important general conditions is that information (personal homepages as much as nicknames, and so on) have to create attraction due to the enormous demand for selection.<sup>64</sup> Without considering these special media conditions we cannot discuss whether personal religious statements reflect real religious confessions or experiences or whether they adopt strategies of attraction by "upgrading" their religious biography or offering popular religious information. Especially when homepages or contributions in discussion forums combine their religious presentation with commercial interests, we have to take these communicational conditions into account as a kind of advertising. A homepage that offers ritual knowledge of Wicca along with items of Santeria (voodoo religion) and presents them in syncretism as the essence of a witch's wisdom clearly cannot be regarded as ideal proof of religious creativity in the ritual discourse. Some of the patchwork phenomena on the Internet that we can observe may refer to the special conditions of the Internet medium rather than religious ideas. A homepage that offers Santeria *and* Wiccan rituals at the same time might be attractive to more users.<sup>65</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Although Internet research offers many important opportunities for our research, we have to realize the limits of immanent Internet analysis. We have to take the socio-cultural and technical selection effects into account and explore them. And, having found online material, there are acts of communication that we simply cannot see. We cannot say much about why users join a discussion forum or why they create a personal religious homepage. We actually have no idea of the media preferences of certain users and of the significance of the Internet in

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<sup>63</sup> See Dawson 2000, 32-36; Misoeh 2004, 133-137

<sup>64</sup> See Wirth & Schweiger 1999.

comparison with other media. Furthermore, we have to become aware that every appearance on the Internet reflects the special conditions of the medium: certain strategies of gaining attraction (partly due to commercial interests) may dominate the presentation of religious ideas.

Last but not least, we have to consider the problem of fake or avatar identities – especially the extreme form of multiple personality users. While pure online research is fast and cheap, there are severe difficulties in empirical online research, especially concerning the question of identity:<sup>66</sup>

But what is the real meaning of socio-demographic data obtained through, say, a structured on-line questionnaire? What is really happening, for example, when SweetBabe, a regular participant in IRC channel #netsex and one of the hypothetical cases from our survey sample, tells us that her real name is Mary, she's thirty years old and she works as a secretary? ... Even when the design of research does expect some data referring to the *real world*, it is never correct to accept this data without keeping in mind that obtaining information about someone's off-line life through on-line means of communication – although seemingly easy and convenient – is always a hazardous, uncertain procedure, not simply because of the risk of being deliberately deceived but also because in such cases the medium itself increases the lack of *ethnographic context* ...<sup>67</sup>

Some researchers, including Heidi Campbell, Andreas Ackermann, and Stephen O'Leary, claim to consolidate these different approaches towards (religious) identity on the Internet – O'Leary's research considers how people put their ritual knowledge into practice, what significance rituals have for them, and how they even participate in online rituals.<sup>68</sup> The key question focuses on the way the Internet is shaping and transforming individual and collective religious beliefs and practices.<sup>69</sup> Other researchers, such as Helen Berger, Douglas Ezzy, Mia Lövheim, Alf Linderman, Stewart Hoover, and Göran Larsson, can already exhibit some notable results in their combined research methods – partly due to the fact that they primarily focused on the question of how specific groups use modern media and the Internet in the context of ethnographic audience research.<sup>70</sup>

The problem of constructing religious identity as an interplay of self representation and responses of others, particularly, requires consideration of not only online communication but also the religious and social experiences of the offline world: ” ... previous research into

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<sup>65</sup> See Ezzy 2001 on the commercialization of witchcraft.

<sup>66</sup> See Dawson 2000, 29-31.

<sup>67</sup> Paccagnella 1997, 4.

<sup>68</sup> See Ackermann 2000, 287-289; O'Leary 2004, 48-49.

<sup>69</sup> See Campbell 2003, 217-218.

<sup>70</sup> See Berger & Ezzy 2004; Lövheim 2004, 48, 97-99; Linderman & Lövheim 2003, 233-238; Hoover et al. 2004, 11-17.

these issues makes it clear that we need to approach the construction of identity in relation to online interaction as a process *situated* in the structuring conditions of the offline as well as the online context.”<sup>71</sup> Religious communication and presentation is part of a reciprocal process of constructing serious and durable identity in the interplay of online and offline social experiences.<sup>72</sup>

Considering all these uncertainties related to pure online research in the field of religion, it seems to be promising to combine online research with classical empirical field work, such as quantitative surveys or qualitative interviews with users and webmasters. We will know more about religious individuals and the social conditions of religious communication on the Internet when we consolidate the results of online and offline research. Thus, there is no reason to hold back: the deeper insights that we can expect are auspicious – and many religious Internet users are keen to talk with attentive interviewers interested in their religious biography!

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<sup>71</sup> Lövheim 2004b, 61. Also see Lövheim 2004b, 60-63, 71-72.

<sup>72</sup> See Lövheim 2004b, 67.

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<sup>73</sup> All websites were retrieved on 01/25/2005.