Chapter 16
The Electric Soul:
Faith, Spirituality, and Ontology in a Digital Age

Benjamin J. Cline
Western New Mexico University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter will use media ecology, and rhetorical theories of ideology construction and social intervention to look at the ways that contemporary digital media interact with religious and spiritual practices in order to inform and create identities. This chapter will examine the ideology construction that occurs in the Crosswire.org applications, specifically PocketSword designed for the iPhone/iPad and AndBible designed for Android devices. This chapter will also look at the ideology construction and identity creation in the English language section of onislam.net, a website designed to help English-speaking Muslims live out their faith. Finally the chapter will consider Osel Shen Phen Ling, a website designed for "Practicing Buddhadharma in the Tibetan Gelugpa Tradition".

INTRODUCTION

The ontology that develops in a society shaped by new media is different than the ontology that might have been shaped without it. This chapter shows that through the electronic lifestyle that its media ecology has cultivated, the digital media age has given humans a different understanding of who we are. This ontological understanding develops within a framework which has been shaped by millennia of ontological discussion provided to us through the religious teaching and practices. Thus, the intersections where faith and spirituality meet with digital media are fruitful sites for the exploration of identity.

In addition to the concepts of identity provided by the religions informing the artifacts examined in this chapter, the chapter will use two important communication theoretical constructs as lenses whereby we can look at the phenomena of ontological construction in the media age: media ecology and the rhetoric of social intervention. The first theory is media ecology. "Media ecology is an intellectually vibrant, dynamic, and growing discipline within communication studies" (Forsberg, 2009, p. 137). It understands that media rea not merely parts of one's environments, rather media are environments (Postman N., 1970). These environments allow some ways of knowing, being, and valuing to develop easily while at the same time inhibiting others.

The rhetoric of social intervention (RSI) explains that communication messages act as interventions into ideologies as they are being socially constructed. In fact, RSI explains how ideology is socially constructed. RSI posits that interventions into society take place when communicators work to create "shifts" in one of three areas: on what society focuses its attention, in the perceptions of interpersonal needs, and finally in the social understanding of power structure (Brown, 1978; Opt & Gring, 2009). This chapter will show that the shift enacted by newer media in areas of spirituality are primarily shifts in attention. RSI contends that attention shifts come in three rhetorical forms, changes in the audience's epistemology, axiology or ontology (Brown, 1982; Huang, 1996; Gonzalez, 1989; Leroux, 1991; Opt & Gring, 2009; Stoner, 1989). The primary shift in spiritual communication when adjusting to new media is a shift in ontology.

This chapter will look at three specific spaces for interplay between faith and technology in order to explore the identity construction inherent in three spaces. Crosswire.org application, Onislam.net and Oshel Shen Phen Ling.

In order to study these sites, this chapter will have to lay some groundwork for the type of examination being done. First, the chapter will explain the role that media and faith each play separately in the process of identity construction. The chapter will thereby show that identity is not merely a construction of social messages. Rather, the media through which those messages are received and perceived also function in and of themselves to create identity. Our identity, then is at least partially constructed, not through what we are told, but by the medium that is used to tell us who we are.

The chapter will explain how religious practices function as media and thus how they can work into larger media ecology. In order to accomplish this, the chapter will refer to a broad range of spiritual activities as "faith-acts." Faith-acts can be understood as everything from communicating about one's faith or spiritual practice, creating or utilizing the mythology of one's faith or spiritual practice, to engaging in the actual rites and procedures of a particular practice. The chapter will show that inherent in that ideology is a rhetorical argument for a metaphysics that defines the identity of adherents.

By doing this, the chapter will have clearly shown that religious identity is more than simply checking a box in a demographic survey. Rather, the identity provided through religious and spiritual teaching is ontological and all encompassing. The faith-acts do more than tell a person who she or he is. They make a person who he or she is and who the other people around them are as well.

The chapter will then work to discuss the interplay between the two identity constructing agents. The chapter will show that the faith-based actions and artifacts which are enacted and created within the ecology inhabited by new media function as rhetorical interventions into the ideology which the medium is constructing. Following Brown (1978), the chapter will show that these interventions can be anomaly featuring, and thus can either counter the ideology inherent in the medium, or anomaly masking and thus can encourage the ideology in each of the media.

The first medium that will be analyzed will be the apps from Crosswire.org. The chapter will consider the ideology inherent in the way in which the apps work differently than reading an ink and paper Bible. The chapter will consider the ways in which the ideology of Bible-reading works for and against the ideology of on-screen delivery and the ways in which the apps create an argument in which anomalies are masked and identity is maintained.

The second medium considered is from the English Language portion of OnIslam.net. This chapter will look at the role of community constructions of the page. The chapter will consider the ways in which community can and cannot be constructed through an electronically mediated site and how those differences inherent in the media ecology of the internet might affect the identity of the adherents who use it.

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