Article

Digital Media: When God Becomes Everybody—The Blurring of Sacred and Profane

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Abstract: This article explores the relationship between communication technology and religion. While previous research has focused on how religious institutions and individuals use digital media, this article emphasizes the religious feelings digital media seem to invoke, with examples like the Jesus Phone or Kopimism. This is explained using theories from Religious Studies. Borrowing from Durkheim, digital media are examined as “sacred” and as “profane”. It is suggested that digital media can be both sacred and profane because hypermodern societies have sanctified the profane. More specifically, hypermodern societies have “killed” god and replaced it with the human, with everybody. It is then digital media—a tool that is meant to be owned by everybody and represent everybody—that take the place of the divine. This tool then, *because* it connects and communicates human needs and everyday thoughts (and not despite that), inspires feelings of awe and sanctity, even as we use it for the most profane activities.

Keywords: digital religion; Durkheim; sacred and profane; social media; digital media

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1. Introduction: From Apes to Apps

A viral video of a crow using a tool to slide on a roof for fun inspires curiosity and fear: after all, using tools has allowed humans to achieve more than what our bodies allowed us. Unlike other predators, we did not survive using our fangs or claws: we survived using spears and writings. According to common myth and evolutionary science (Washburn 1960), it is the ape's unique hand and finger movements, alongside their massive brains, that allow them to use tools. Humans, the “best” of the apes, have just mastered that art to an impressive degree, from using a stick to hunt, to using an app to navigate. As a result, humans have been for a long time inspired by their own tools, maybe even obsessed with them.

Humans have also elevated their tools and made them holy, sacred technologies. Think, for example, of Prometheus stealing fire from the gods. Or how the technology of writing was used to produce sacred books, like the Torah or Quran, which in religious imagination were books that existed before and beyond this world. Another example is John Murray Spear, who in the early 19th century crafted an electrically powered Messiah (Buescher 2006). Soon after, the telegraph was conceived of as a holy tool of communication (Carey [1987] 2009), even portrayed as delivered by an angel (see Figure 1). More recently, the debut of the first iPhone was lauded by some as the second coming of Christ (Campbell and La Pastina 2010). Thus, what is it about technology that inspires religious feelings, even when it is used for mundane activities?

There are a few ways in which this relationship between humans, communication tools, and religiosity unravels. One, noted by James Carry, is to divinize the communication tool because it can be used for religious purposes. For example, writing about the telegraph, Carey notes that:

This new technology entered American discussions not as a mundane fact but as divinely inspired for the purposes of spreading the Christian message farther and faster, eclipsing time and transcending space, saving the heathen, bringing closer and making more probable the day of salvation. (Carey [1987] 2009, p. 11)

Figure 1. The first telegraph message from California. Retrieved from: <https://www.loc.gov/item/96516339/> (accessed on 31 August 2020).

In this view, communication tools become sacred not for their communication powers, but because those powers can be used for good—they are holy because they mediate religion and can carry its messages far and loud (Hoover 2006). This approach can be seen today too in how some religious communities treat the internet. For example, the Jewish ultraorthodox community of Chabad allows and encourages using the internet for the purposes of sharing religious information, such as where to find Kosher food or at what time the Shabbat begins (Golan and Stadler 2016). While others in the larger ultraorthodox community speak against the internet and even ban it, this community have embraced it because of its far-reaching accessibility—its ability to spread religious messages (Nahon and Barzilai 2005). In these examples, it is the message that the communication tool carries that makes it holy.

A second approach to the relationship between communication technology and religiosity is one in which the communication tool itself is thought of as holy—regardless of the message. This can be seen for example, in the case of the “Jesus phone” (Campbell and La Pastina 2010). During the debut of the iPhone, several bloggers declared that this device is “not only a revolutionary technology, but a technological savior” (Campbell and La Pastina 2010, p. 1192). They thus aptly began to refer to it as “the Jesus Phone”. According to Campbell and La Pastina, while the term began as a joke, it was soon incorporated into Apple’s advertising and news media stories about the iPhone. Thus, religious language, popular culture, and technology were all mixed to contribute to a history of sanctifying tools.

Another example is Kopimism, now recognized as an official religion. Kopimism is a new religious movement which views the spreading of information through file sharing as a holy action. According to their website, their worldview, inspired by digital file-sharing and the internet, holds four principles: All knowledge to all; the search for knowledge is sacred; the circulation of knowledge is sacred; and the act of copying is sacred (Kopimistsamfundet 2020). They also consider the shortcuts CTRL+V and CTRL+C to be sacred symbols (see Figure 2). This religious movement clearly articulates that for them, the digital itself is sacred. Other similar examples can be found in technopagans around the world, and especially those who are a part of Silicon Valley, such as Mark Pesce (Aupers 2010).

In these cases, either explicitly or implicitly, the technology itself is revered and sanctified. This approach can be associated with a type of technological determinism (McLuhan 1964) in which the medium itself is the main focus, not the content. It can also be noted in Davis’ (1998) concept of “technognosis”—the idea that communication technologies have some mythological and mystical qualities.

Figure 2. Ctrl-C, Ctrl-V as sacred symbols. Available online: <https://kopimistsamfundet.se/> (accessed on 31 August 2020).

It seems easy to understand why religious institutions and communities will sanctify a technology in order to spread their messages. It is the second approach, therefore, that requires some further investigation. Here, I offer some insight into why and how contemporary technology incites religious feelings. This insight is helpful for understanding the current relationship between humans, technology, and religion. It is also especially important when we consider potential ethical consequences of such relationships. The rest of this article expands on this approach, focusing specifically on digital technology. Therefore, the next section focuses first on reviewing previous research on digital technology and religion overall; followed by a review of religious theories that might help to explain why these new media technologies incite religious feelings. Then, the article examines how digital media are not only sacred, but also and at the same time profane, and suggests a solution to mitigate this tension.

2. Digital Religion: An Overview

As the Internet became more widely used in the Western world through the late 1990s, scholars began to ask themselves about the impact of this new technology on individuals and social institutions such as the school, the family, the government, and the church. The field of study that focused on digital media and religious ideas and institution is conceptualized as “Digital Religion”, and it explores the “evolution of religious practices online which are linked to online and offline contexts simultaneously” (Campbell 2013, p. 1). The study of religion and digital media can be articulated in four waves of research, as suggested by Campbell and Lövheim (2011): The first wave is considered the “descriptive wave”, in which scholars began to illustrate this new phenomenon of religion online. Academic articles in this wave included descriptions of online religious behaviors, texts, rituals, and communities. Researchers in this wave tended to see religion online as a separate, new form of religious participation (see *Give Me that Online Religion* (Brasher 2004)) or as an immigration of religious practices from the offline to the online (see, for instance, O’Leary’s (1996) article, “Cyberspace as Sacred Space”). The second wave started the categorization of the information collected, in which scholars began to note trends and create typologies. Individual users’ religious identity construction online, as well as the authenticity of online experience, were some of the main motivating questions. New religious movements cultivated by the 1990s–2000s Internet (Web 1.0) were explored alongside more traditional religions. The third wave more clearly dealt with theoretical questions and was therefore considered the “theoretical turn”. As the internet became less of a “cyberspace” and more of a mundane medium, scholars began observing the ways religious groups and individuals negotiate their relationship with these new media. In this wave, we also find comparative work between religious traditions, as well as studies of spirituality.

The fourth and current wave in the field of Digital Religion is more focused on exploring the daily religious use of digital technology, with a focus on religious identity, community, and authority. Studies in this wave include exploring religious iTunes applications (Campbell et al. 2014; Wagner 2012), religious games or religious symbolism in video games (Šisler et al. 2017), religious internet memes (Bellar et al. 2013, etc. As can be seen from these examples, more nuanced attention is being given to the specific medium, its affordances, and how it is used by religious individuals. This nuanced approach is important to keep in mind when exploring the relationship between religion and digital media: to see it both in its macro and micro expressions, both as sacred and as profane, as suggested below.

3. Theories of Digital Religion

The literature on religion and media deals not only with phenomenon, or describing religious uses of media, but also with theory, explaining the relationship between media and religion. These theories are helpful for the purposes of this article and therefore briefly reviewed here. Lundby (2012) provides a well-explained review of the main theoretical stances in the study of online religion. According to Lundby (2012), five main theoretical stances can be found in the study of religion and media: Technological Determinism, Mediatization of Religion, Mediation of Religion, Religious Social Shaping of Technology (RSST), and Mediation of Sacred Forms. Technological Determinism (McLuhan 1964) puts the emphasis on the technology and envisions technology as a guiding force that will determine human behavior. Therefore, when new technologies are used, religion will adapt and change in accord with these technologies. Mediatization is a more nuanced version of technological determinism that is explicitly articulated in Stig Hjarvard's book *The Mediatization of Culture and Society* (Hjarvard 2013). Unlike technological determinism, which sees every technology as a determining force, Hjarvard's mediatization theory focuses on the influence of media in the 20th and 21st centuries, in societies that live in highly technological, highly modern surroundings. Hjarvard claimed that in those societies, media industries operate as social institutions. That is, media industries are organizations that inform or establish norms of social behavior. Furthermore, media as social institutions are increasingly gaining power. His theory about the Mediatization of Religion, therefore, claims that these media institutions are replacing religious institutions, or that existing religious institutions begin to function using "media logics". By contrast, Heidi Campbell's Religious Social Shaping of Technology (RSST) claims that we should pay attention to the ways society shapes technology, rather than the other way around (Campbell 2010; Lundby 2012). Coming from the tradition of Information & Communication Technology studies, Social Shaping of Technology (SST) is a theory adapted by Campbell to address religious users and uses. SST considers how technologies are created, shaped, used, and negotiated in the societies that make and employ them. Religious SST is a theoretical approach and method. It argues for the necessity of asking questions "about how technologies are conceived of, as well as used, in light of a religious community's beliefs, moral codes, and historical tradition of engagement with other forms of media technology" (Campbell 2010, p. 59). In other words, this approach puts the emphasis on the religious mindset and worldview as it engages with communication technology.

Alternatively, the theories of Mediation of Religion (Hoover 2006) and Mediation of Sacred Forms (Lynch 2012) focus on how religion has always been mediated. Gordon Lynch in his book *The Sacred in the Modern World* (Lynch 2012) uses Durkheim's concept of "the Sacred" (which is explored in depth later) and argues that the sacred is mediated in our contemporary world. He explains that "all sacred forms are mediated . . . media communication about, and interaction with, those forms . . . sacred meanings are not, therefore, free-floating signifiers but materially mediated" (p. 87). For these thinkers (Hoover 2006; Lynch 2012), media technologies are the material which carries religious meaning and messages. They stress that new forms of mediated religiosity—e.g., televangelism—continue a long tradition of religion being mediated through public media. However, "in late modern

societies, public media are the primary institutional structure through which forms of the sacred are experienced, reproduced, and contested” (p. 89). Thus, in order to understand how the sacred is conceived, researchers must examine public media.

While these theories do a good job of explaining the ways in which religious institutions, individuals, and ideas engage in digital media, there is still a gap that needs to be explored when it comes to the religious feelings that digital media invoke. To address that gap, I suggest that we turn to the study of religion and its theories on how religious feelings percolate. Similar to Lynch, I focus my analysis on Durkheim, as the father of sociology, or in this case, of the sociological study of religion.

4. Digital Media and Religion: Sanctifying the Internet

The study of religion is engaged with many questions, which mainly stem from the question, “what is religion?” For the purposes of this investigation, it is helpful to understand what religion is if we claim that digital media invoke religious feelings. According to theologian Paul Tillich, religious feelings are a deep part of the human spirit and therefore can be found not only in churches or sacred texts, but in any endeavor that humans take on, be it cognitive, moralistic, artistic, spiritual, etc. (Tillich 1959). This is an important assumption for this article: that anything, even a smartphone, can have religious meanings for humans. With this assumption in mind, we can take the next step, and ask: why do certain objects and ideas evoke religious feelings?

Here, Durkheim’s (Durkheim and Swain [1912] 2008) differentiation between the Sacred and the Profane is helpful. In his book *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim (Durkheim and Swain [1912] 2008) differentiates between things that are sacred—held apart, made holy, guarded—and regular things, mundane, daily, profane things. Think of the Sabbath versus the days of the weeks, or Christmas tree versus regular trees. According to Durkheim, religion is this action of making things sacred. In his words:

A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and surrounded by prohibitions—beliefs and practices that unite its adherents in a single moral community called a church. (Durkheim and Swain [1912] 2008, p. 46)

Durkheim’s definition, although more than 100 years old now, is extremely useful and is still used by scholars of religion and culture. I suggest using this definition to examine the behaviors and feelings regarding digital media. Is there a unified system that sanctifies digital media?

The answer to this question is, of course, complicated. It does seem that in hyper-modern societies, science and technology are part of a sanctified system. As Jeffery Alexander writes:

Major inventions like the steam engine, railroad, telegraph and telephone [. . .] were hailed by elites and masses as vehicles for secular transcendence. Their speed and power, it was widely proclaimed, would undermine the earthly constraints of time, space, and scarcity . . . The technicians and engineers who understood this new technology were elevated to the status of worldly priests. (Alexander 1990, p. 164)

Since modern technology was meant to elevate human existence, its tools, more specifically the computer, became sacred (Alexander 1990). Alexander provides examples for this type of discourse from as early as the 1940s. For example, he provides the *Times* description of the first computers in 1944 and in 1965. In both cases, computers are described as all-power, yet mysterious, machines which are kept “unseen from the public” (Alexander 1990, p. 165). Because these machines are seen as both powerful and mysterious, they fit the category of magic. Additionally, if technology is indistinguishable from magic, and magic is synonymous with religion, then technology becomes indistinguishable from religion. Alexander stresses that the computer is an object that is “sacred and sealed off from the profane world . . . ” (Alexander 1990, p. 166). Digital media, as the offspring of the computer, might also inspire

religious feelings, albeit, perhaps less of an explicit unified system of beliefs and practices, and more of a magical system that inspires awe.

Alexander is not alone in conceptualizing the computer, and its offspring, digital media, as sacred. This use of Durkheim to theorize and explain digital media can be seen, for example, in the 1990s, when the internet was becoming popular. In the 1990s and onwards, several researchers and journalists wrote about this new technology using concepts like divine or sacred (Chama 1996; Judge 1999). In 1996, Turkle, an MIT researcher, suggested in an interview to *Time* magazine that the internet is being compared to a godly object “because it emulates a divine trait, being a distributed, decentralized, self-organizing system” (Chama 1996). In fact, in 1999, William Stahl analyzed 175 articles from *Time* Magazine regarding digital media and concluded that 36% of them used explicit magical terminology (Stahl 1999); see also (Aupers and Houtman 2010). In 2001, Bass summarizes that there is an ideal, sacred World-Wide-Web, imagined by technologists and communication companies (Bass 2001). This sacred web, he argues, differs from the real one that people have access to. The real Web is profane because it is not as accessible as the imagined web is. While Bass brings up an interesting distinction, it seems that as the Web became faster and more “real” in people’s daily lives, it continues to hold sacred meanings. For example, scholars have noted that video games such as *Second Life* or *World of Warcraft* (WoW) can provide a feeling of sacredness or spiritual uplifting (Geraci 2014; Gálik and Tolnaiová 2017). Gálik and Tolnaiová, borrowing from Mircea Eliade’s understanding of the Sacred, show how WoW crafts a sacred space and sacred time. They write that “... a spiritual experience online can be as intense as a spiritual experience offline. For this reason, *World of Warcraft*, for example, can satisfy the religious needs of a present hypermodern man” (Gálik and Tolnaiová 2017, p. 6). Interviewing several programmers in 2010, Aupers noted how many of them felt a sense of elevation when programming, or even that they conceptualized themselves as magicians: “many argue that programmers are, like magicians, involved in “arcane knowledge” inaccessible to laymen and that they demonstrate extreme control and power over the world” (Aupers 2010, p. 230).

Even the terms used to describe certain aspects of digital media today hint at their all-pervading power: The Cloud, Big Data, and Data Lake, for example. These names evoke powers that are abstract and beyond human control. This “sacred technology” has returned to the first deities: the gods of nature, of sky and water—and their priests (programming companies) carry similarly religious or mythical names: Oracle, Lenovo (meaning: New Legend), Google (an incomprehensible number), etc. In these various examples, digital media—be it early 90s Cyberspace, mid 2010s’ virtual worlds, or late 2010s social media—is sanctified.

However, using the concept of “Sacred” to describe digital media seemed to have fallen out of favor. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, leading scholars in the field of digital religion call for a more ordinary, nuanced understanding of the internet, as a place where people express their everyday, lived religious experiences (Campbell and Evolvi 2020). This abandonment of the use of sacred is perhaps a result of the fact that during the development of the internet, it became increasingly mundane and, thus, profane. That is, if we say that the internet inspires religious feelings, it is then in the category of the Sacred. However, our everyday use of the internet—to order pizza, communicate with peers, or shop—puts it in the category of the profane. It is this tension between the internet as sacred and the internet as profane that needs to be diffused. However, before we can diffuse it, we must see how the internet “became” profane.

5. Digital Media as Profane: From Cyberspace to Everyday Uses

In the 1990s and early 2000s, the internet was a space that many people had heard of, but few had access to or understood how to use. In December 1995, only 0.4% of the world’s population used the internet (Internetworldstats n.d.). By December 2018, that number had grown to 55.1% of the world’s population (Internetworldstats n.d.). In the USA, about half the population had access to the internet in 2000, and 85.8% in 2020 (Clement 2020).

Numbers alone do not tell the full story of how the internet became profane, though. To understand that, we need to take a more qualitative look.

In 1998, Annette Markham ([Markham 1998](#)) published her book *Life Online* in which the scholar offers an ethnographic overview of the community of online users. The subtitle of the book was “Researching Real Experience in Virtual Space”. As can be seen from the description and title, Markham’s book gave the average (academic) reader a glance into a space most did not actually visit—cyberspace, the virtual space. Markham’s work was trying to show that the internet is “real”—that it is not some fantasy world people go to, but a “real experience” as the title suggests. This was to counter the mainstream attitude toward the internet in those days, as a desolate place that only few visited and fewer understood. Web 1.0 was a space-beyond-space, where nerds and technophiles could find knowledge, community, and respect. As the web became more accessible, however, it also became more populated, and the more people used the technology, the more commonplace it became. In other words, perhaps because people got used to this technology, it lost some of its awe, some of its magic. (Nevertheless, it could be argued that it is like religious magic—even when people get used to it, it still maintains its power. Think, for example, of Catholic Mass or Jewish Kiddush, done weekly and yet experienced as magical.) In addition, the internet also became populated with marketers and businesspeople, looking to make a penny from the dot.com industry. Once the moneychangers entered the Temple of the Web, it became desecrated—and while a few called for a return to its sanctity, once it became popular, there was no going back.

The accessibility and popularity of the internet go hand in hand with its democratizing tendencies. Thus, through social media, not only marketers have access to many people, but so does everybody with an internet connection. This ability of Web 2.0 to allow anyone with an internet connection to not only hear, but also speak, was the result of changes in technology and culture. From a technological side, the connection became cheaper and faster, and more websites were created in which one can upload and post without any programming knowledge necessary. Using websites like Myspace at first, and later Facebook or Twitter, any user with a working knowledge of typing in English could post their ideas to the whole wide world. Using applications like WordPress or Wix, anyone could have their own professional-looking website. YouTube has made filmmakers or music stars of anyone with enough ambition. Finally, with minimum coding, you can create your own software application using Microsoft Azure, or any other App building software. In other words, the magic and power that once only few possessed is now accessible to everybody. At least in theory. This is where cultural shifts come into play. From a cultural perspective, Henry Jenkins famously called this movement “participatory culture” ([Jenkins 2006](#)). According to Jenkins, the internet is more democratic and participatory because of its open communication channels; any user can create and upload content, interact with other users and companies, blog, react, post, and repost. This means people have more avenues through which to voice their opinions, and more access to participate in the creation and distribution of media, which should naturally destabilize existing power structures of media production and distribution and grant more power to individuals and communities.

This idea of the internet empowering everybody struck a chord with popular discourse. For example, the Arab Spring (around 2010) was theorized to have happened mainly because of social media ([Eltantawy and Wiest 2011](#); [Comunello and Anzera 2012](#)). In the study of digital religion, it was argued that the internet is breaking hierarchies and empowering, for example, women in traditionally patriarchal religions ([Pitkowsky 2011](#)). However, internet scholars in the last century have noted that this participatory culture is not always so equalizing—for example, that internet companies learn much more about users than what they provide users with ([Andrejevic 2007](#)); or that religious leaders and users can use the internet to strengthen traditional structures of power ([Tsuria and Campbell 2020](#)). Regardless of who is empowered online, it is clear that the internet has penetrated every aspect of modern living. It is used by “everyone” (in hypermodern

societies) for almost anything: working, filing taxes, asking for medical advice, speaking with friends and family, dating, banking, shopping, scheduling appointments, learning a new skill, entertainment, anything. Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, when leaving one's house was sometime impossible, people needed to use digital communication technology for most aspects of one's life (Nguyen et al. 2020). No longer a secret tool used by priests-programmers, the internet is now used by lay people for mundane tasks—it is profane. However, as noted above, it is still held by many as sacred. Can this tool be both sacred and profane?

6. Digital Media—Sacred and Profane

So far, we have seen digital media as sacred, mysterious, and set apart or digital media as profane, daily, and mundane. How can this tension be held? How can digital media be both profane and sacred? The answer I suggest is quite simple: it is both because we (hypermodern society) have sanctified the profane.

This argument goes back to processes of secularization, and even before—the Enlightenment movement in Europe (Swatos and Christiano 1999). As religious institutions and beliefs were becoming weaker, a new ideology has taken their place: that of science and technology (Gauchet 1999; Yilmaz and Bahçekapili 2015). Once gods could no longer save humanity, a new savior was called upon—that of medicine, trains, machines, and computers. According to David Noble (1999), “the religion of technology” is deeply rooted in Christian theology, which bridged the human and the divine. Technology is meant to take us out of our worldly worries and into an otherworldly state of being. As Noble puts it: “A thousand years in the making, the religion of technology has become the common enchantment . . . The expectation of ultimate salvation through technology, whatever the immediate human and social costs, has become the unspoken orthodoxy . . . ” (p. 207). Regardless of when this type of thinking began (maybe as early as when humans had tools?), the idea that technology is here to save (or damn) us has been articulated by scholars and theologians before. That type of argument, however, makes technology wholly sacred, and we have seen that technology has clearly profane uses.

My argument is therefore taking us a step forward. It is not that technology has replaced gods/God—it is that *we*, the human, have replaced them. Oppenheimer, in his infamous quote, proclaimed “Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds”—citing a god from the Bhagavad-Gita. Put simply, Oppenheimer touched on a notion in modernity, that we humans now have the powerful tools of the gods (Temperton 2017). It is not the tool that is wholly sacred, though—it is the man that takes on god-like powers. That the human is the “new god” is probably a process that can be traced back to the Humanist movement, with its focus on human importance (rather than the divine). One might think of Nietzsche's work in *Ecce Homo* (Nietzsche 1911) or his writings on the *Übermensch*—in both cases, to be human, fully, is a divine state. *Ecce Homo* is especially interesting, because in it, Nietzsche describes mundane and “profane” human behaviors (Nietzsche 1911, like drinking tea instead of coffee (p. 32) or writing well (p. 55)) as of the utmost importance, as rituals, maybe even as divine actions. In a sense, Nietzsche is here sacralizing the human.

It is therefore the human—human needs and wants, menial as they might be—that is viewed as sacred in hypermodernity. One piece of evidence for this can be seen in what we call “human rights” and their sacrality in legal, journalistic, and general discourses (Joas 2013). Human rights, even as a legal document, call for the “sacredness of the person” (Joas 2013, p. 5), all while dealing with basic needs—such as food, protection, work, and even “the right to education and the enjoyment of benefits of cultural freedom and scientific progress” (UN n.d.). Thus, it seems that mundane human activities are sacred in today's Western culture—and what is a better representation of mundane human activities than the internet? While other modern technologies have always been far, kept apart, or in the control of someone else (some higher power like, for example, programmers or TV personalities), the internet feels like it belongs to *everybody*. The internet is especially human (and therefore divine, sacred) because it seems to reflect all human experiences and voices.

This type of thinking conceptualizes technology not as a tool that will lead humanity to some otherworldly salvation, but rather as a tool that reflects here and now in its wholeness. Hypermodern thinking seeks no otherworld because we realized *there is nowhere else to go*. This is it—this world, this human body. So why not worship this? Seen in a positive light, we have brought heaven to earth. Seen more negatively, we have abandoned any hope of being anything more than our basic needs. Here is where the important discussion of ethics must be addressed: if the human, the profane, is the sacred, what type of ethical thinking does that imply?

Almost all religious systems have a structure of morality or ethics, be it a complex system of rules and regulations (like in Judaism or Islam) or a more general “turn the other cheek” (like in versions of Christianity or Buddhism). Morality has been taught for generations in temples and sacred texts, but also in songs, nurseries, and more recently, mass media (Shaw 2012). However, even the morality preached in films and TV series was based on the “old” religions, on salvation and otherworldliness. Is there a different morality for the age of digital media, in which profane and sacred are one? If so, who should keep it? The priests of the era, the technologists? Or maybe the prophets, the academics? What is clear is that the judges of our time—the government institutions of police, courts, and schools—are slow to understand the moral issues brought on by the use of digital media (evidence are in abundance for this, but I recommend the documentary series *Don’t F**k with Cats: Hunting an Internet Killer*, 2019).

It seems that there is some form of morality—a mix, perhaps, of old and new—that is kept by the technologists themselves. For example, both Facebook and Twitter have taken active stands against hate speech and racism on their platform (Guo and Johnson 2020; Nurik 2019). They have been so diligent in this undertaking that some alt-right individuals felt they were no longer allowed to express themselves on these platforms. However, here the participatory logic of digital media prevails, because these same groups created a parallel social media platform, Parler, which has no such limitations. This example hints at a deeper ethical condition of digital media. It seems that the “religious” decree of digital media, and especially social media, is to see and be seen—to participate. There is a logic in this. As noted by Healey and Woods, “rampant sharing” is seen as an ethical decree by Silicon Valley leaders (Healey and Woods 2019). If the power of digital media is that they represent everybody—in fact, if digital media are sanctified because they represent everybody (see above)—then it is everybody’s “job” to contribute to this mass-shared divine–human communication. It is not that ethics are abandoned in the age of digital media, but rather, their focus has shifted. Ethical behavior is focused on the everyday speech and behaviors of regular people and its results here on Earth and not in some otherworld—and a new ethical decree is underlining all behavior on digital media: click and share!

7. Conclusions: A Song of Praise to the Profane

This article explored the relationship between humans and technology, focusing specifically on the religious feelings current communication technology inspires. While technology has stirred awe in human imagination for centuries, it seems that digital communication—the computer and the internet—have been especially and recently deemed sacred, magical, divine. Some might say that even though these tools were created by humans for humans, they represent some higher power. I suggest that it is *because* they were created by humans for humans that we sanctify them.

There is a religious ideology—present in Zen, Judaism, Catholic thinking, and probably in most religious traditions—that says: “bless the mundane” (Kornfield 2001; Keane 2013; Frand 2018). In fact, in some religious thinking, even the end-of-days (messianic days) begins when the mundane is sacred. See, for example, Dorothy Day, as she muses over her work as a mother: “... living in the country, with little children, with growing things, one has the sacramental view of life. All things are God’s, and all are holy” as cited in (Pasternak 2015). This attitude is perhaps stronger in recent history because of what

Weber refers to as “The Protestant Work Ethic” (Weber [1930] 2001)—the idea that work here, on this earth, is sacred.

To put it simply, in the 20th and 21st centuries, hypermodern societies have “killed” god and replaced it with the human, with everybody. Then, we created a device that is meant to be owned by everybody and represent everybody—to be a shared brain of human consciousness, if you will (Goertzel 2012). This tool, then, because it connects and communicates human needs and everyday thoughts (and not despite that), inspires feelings of awe and sanctity, even as we use it for the most profane activities. It blurs the sacred and profane because we have blurred them too.

In other words, Western Capitalist society has been sanctifying work, and other profane activities, for a while now. This can be seen by observing work ethics (and hours), marketing, or simply general life in hypermodern societies, and this culminates in the attitude towards digital media, a tool that is at once both magical and mundane, both sacred and profane. With this in mind, I believe the prophets (Academia, Journalists) and priests (Silicon Valley, Tech companies) of digital media need to seriously consider the ethical codes of a society in which the profane is sacred. Such a code could be, as I noted above, mostly focused on the economics of sharing, but it can also be centered on the sanctity of human life and experiences.

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