Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

2.   Introduction

2.1   Scope and structure

Tools and uses of online communication change quickly, so research from the late 1990s is already, in many cases, redundant. Few papers from before 2000 were included in the review. This is the point in time at which 40% of the UK population had accessed the internet, meaning web browsing was no longer restricted to a small minority[1]. Papers written before this are concerned with much older technologies, and are therefore mostly outdated and becoming irrelevant.

Perspectives from other mainstream religions (Islam, Buddhism, Judaism and Hinduism) have been included where the content of the research sheds light on the way in which websites have been used. This also means more research from outside the US has been included, although the US remains the largest source of output on religious use of the internet. The terms United Kingdom, British and English are used as appropriate dependent on the geographical area being discussed.

Initially, the main focus of scholarship relating to religion and online tools was the impact of the internet on creating new religions, rituals or ways of doing 'church' online. This work is important, because it forms part of the research landscape although much is not directly relevant to the research questions under

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[1] http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/rdit2/internet-access---households-and-individuals/historical-internet-access/index.html (accessed 13 November 2012)

consideration. Therefore, the research is acknowledged, outlined where appropriate and discussed in detail only where theory or practice are of direct interest. Academic research on all aspects of the internet and religion has remained relatively theory-free, so there are no articles included which attempt to embed practice in a model or framework. Research into related non-religious use has been included where it helps illustrate a concept or specific point.

The nature and reality of online community has been a topic considered by some authors in relation to religious use of the internet, (for example Blank 2011, Kendall 2011, Campbell 2005) but this is not included in depth as part of this review because it is not core to the research undertaken. Likewise, although there is a large literature on website design, usability and analytics, this is not relevant to the research questions posed, and so not included.

2.1.1 Structure

The first sections outline the current connectivity and use of the internet in the UK, and how public life has been affected by increased online communication. Following this, the level of religious identification and the status of the church in England is discussed.

The next sections summarise relevant research into religion and the internet, including consideration of the changing attitudes towards research and the prevailing paradigms. Beginning at section 2.5 , the major strands of research into US, Asian and African religious use of the internet are investigated in-depth, and the ways in which online church has been researched are briefly noted. Finally, in sections 2.9 onwards, work that is specifically related to the research questions is

reviewed: augmentation of practice, information seeking in religious contexts, content of websites, hyperlinks, authority and social media.

2.2   Internet connectivity

Figures from the Office for National Statistics show the use and availability of the internet in the UK over several years (Office for National Statistics 2012a, 2011, 2010, 2009). Figures from the annual updates published in August 2012 and 2011[2] show that internet use is well established within the UK as an integrated part of everyday life:

- 80% of UK households had internet access in 2012 compared to 77% in 2011

- In 2011, 4.9 million people used wi-fi, compared to 0.7 million in 2009

- Of all adults, in 2011 30.1 million (60%) are online daily or almost daily

- In 2011, 91% of 16-24 year olds and 18% of internet users aged 65 or over participated in social networking

- Of those who did use the internet, 59% of the over 65s were online almost every day in 2011

- 90% of all adults used the internet for emailing in 2011, the most popular activity (Office for National Statistics, 2012a, 2011).

Computing applications have developed in the last decade not only in the sophistication of web-based services but also the hardware used to access them, with smartphones and tablet computers becoming popular. Faster and cheaper

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[2] The ONS has delayed delivery of the 2012 estimates for online activity until February 2013. It can reasonably be anticipated that they will show a further increase in the number of people and the frequency of their use, given the trends from previous years.

home computers and broadband connections mean that video-on-demand is growing, via YouTube, the BBC's or other broadcasters' catch-up facilities. Social networking now accounts for a major proportion of time spent on the internet (Nuttall and Gelles 2010). Blogging, virtually unheard of in 2000, has expanded rapidly from relatively few online diaries to an information space of over 133 million blog posts (as measured by Technorati), since 2002 (Mandansky and Arenberg 2011). Between 2003 and 2006 the size of this information space, the 'blogosphere' doubled every six months (Kluth 2006). Smartphones and tablet computers mean services are accessed on the move, as shown by the BBC's Olympic coverage figures. The internet experience in 2012 is fast, complex, multimedia and, as the figures for wireless hotspot use above show, increasingly mobile.

2.3   Religious identification in the UK

The Church of England has a state role in times of celebration such as the 2011 Royal Wedding or the 2012 Diamond Jubilee[3]. However, this does not translate into wider religious practice. One constant change in society – alongside technological and demographic changes – has been a decline in regular churchgoing.

In 2001, the UK National Census included questions on religion for the first time. 8% of people chose not to answer this voluntary question but of those who did, 72% identified themselves as Christian (Office for National Statistics 2004). One major secular organisation highlights how this level of cultural identification does not translate into knowledge of the faith[4], or into actual attendance figures. That claim,

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[3] http://www.thediamondjubilee.org/order-service, accessed 2 June 2012

[4] http://richarddawkinsfoundation.org/ Survey results published on 14 February 2012

however, is not news to the church. A 2005 survey from the Evangelical Alliance shows that only 6.3% of people in the UK regularly attend a Sunday service (Evangelical Alliance 2005). These figures were confirmed by research from the Church of England from 2007, painting a picture of declining church attendance in the UK (Opinion Research Business 2007). However, figures from 2010 suggest that the decline in attendance has now levelled off with media reports in 2012 hinting at a slight rise, and certainly more church weddings taking place (Hewitt 2010, Oborne 2012, Beckford 2012).

In the last thirty years, the age profile of congregations has changed, becoming predominantly older. The churchgoing population has also become urbanised, as a result of immigration into major cities and a related rise in churches characterised as Black churches. The largest loss to congregations has been young people aged 15 to 29 (Brierley 2006). Yet, worldwide, a third of the world's 6 billion people are Christian, (Tomkins 2005) and the global church's 'centre of gravity' is shifting. Anglicanism may be in decline in England but it is growing elsewhere (Tomkins 2005). In 1960:

> *14 per cent of Christians were in Africa and Asia, now it is 32 per cent. There are six times as many Anglican churchgoers in Nigeria as in England...half of all Christians are still Catholic...there are 34,000 Christian denominations worldwide.* (Tomkins 2005, p245)

The next section considers research which has combined the internet with religious studies.

2.4   Internet studies and religion

2.4.1 Internet studies: framing of research

This survey of the literature over the last 12 years shows a shift in both understanding and expectation of how the internet might affect religious practice. Religion and internet research has now become a discipline in its own right (Ess and Consalvo 2011).The bulk of the research has been published in the United States rather than Britain, reflecting not only relative sizes of the research communities but also possibly different attitudes towards religion. In Britain, although there is an established church, religion tends to be seen as a private matter. In the US, where separation of church and state leads to more religious voices appearing in public spheres, religion is more of an open matter. This US/Britain balance is reflected in the literature under review. There are also a number of significant studies on religion and new media from Asia, reflecting the relatively early connectedness of countries such as South Korea or Singapore.

The next sections outline how previous studies have characterised the effects of the internet on religious life and practice.

2.4.2 Utopia versus dystopia

Authors have suggested that the first academic research on internet use was published in 1996, with most citing O'Leary (1996), for example, in Cho (2011). The dominant paradigm for the early research characterised the anticipated changes in society as either wildly dystopian or optimistically utopian. There were expectations that the internet, and the electronic linking of individuals for work and pleasure, would have a profound effect on society. This 'technological determinism' had at its heart the notion that:

structural features of new media induce social change by enabling new forms

of communication and cultivating distinctive skills and sensibilities (Di

Maggio, Hargittai & Russell Neuman 2001, p309)

Thus, the internet would lead inexorably to a changed society; with relationships

and ways of working inescapably affected by the implementation of new tools.

These effects would be revolutionary and hyperbole was commonplace. Castells

(1996) suggested that the ability to combine print, oral and audiovisual media lent

the internet a significance on a par with the development of the alphabet. Forecasts

predicted the wholesale abandonment of commuting, shifts to fully networked

communities and changes to the ways in which relationships would be formed as

discussed in, for example, Helland (2004). The view could be summed up thus:

> *The internet was seen as a bright light, shining above everyday concerns. It*
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> *was a technological marvel, thought to be bringing a new Enlightenment to*
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> *transform the world.* (Wellman 2004, p124)

Christians (2002) argues that religious perspectives are needed when studying

communications technology because the underlying assumption that technology is

value-neutral is flawed suggesting that when 'moral purpose is sacrificed to

technical excellence' the 'religious perspectives help free the field from a narrow,

technicistic view of neutral technology.' He goes so far as to say that technology

could be a cause of 'inauthentic humanness.' (p40).

There were other challenges to the deterministic view, for example, Dutton (2003)

suggested it is wrong to assume change takes a linear path. Other factors would

affect how new technologies are adopted and implemented. These could be

political, geographical or economic, but one key point is that the technologies are

often inherently social. Others such as Borgman (2003) and Wellman (2004) also called for less extreme utopian or dystopian analyses and for more understanding of the internet as a part of continuum of technology, with roots in the telegraph and telephone which have had roles in shaping people's lives, reminding us that:

> *…people do not discard all their old habits and practices with the advent of each new technology* (Borgman 2003, p3)

Wellman's current view of the place of the internet in society is that:

> *It has become embedded in everyday life…become part of everyday things…an important thing but not a special thing. It has become the utility of the masses rather than the plaything of computer scientists.* (Wellman 2011, pp20-21)

Commentary that assumes far-reaching change as a result of new technology tends to concentrate only on the developed world. Castells (1996) said that changing technologies will 'embrace the…core segments of the population in the whole planet' (Castells 1996, p328), yet a 'core segment' is not defined. In addition, technology is largely seen as value-neutral, particularly when the environment is being considered (Christians 2002 provides one exception). The removal of the need to travel to communicate is seen as a major virtue, whilst the increase in power consumption by servers, or the waste generated by built-in obsolescence is not considered. In 2010 there were a number of suicides by workers making Apple products. This brought the workers' conditions to the attention of the consumers' media, possibly for the first time (Johnson 2010), followed up by Rushe (2012).

2.4.3 Online-religion versus religion-online

As internet studies as a discipline and the dystopian/ utopian point of view developed, those studying religion and the internet were also finding their own ways to frame research. Hadden and Cowan (2000) published a significant first collection of articles considering religion and the internet. Within this volume, Christopher Helland discussed the interaction between religion and the internet (Helland 2000). He argued for a distinction between religion-online and online-religion. Religion-online refers to the use of the internet as a broadcast medium. It is the transposition of offline aspects to an online setting without much alteration in attitude, and with maintenance of traditional hierarchies. Church websites that act as 'shop fronts' for particular place-based organisations would fall into this category. In contrast, online-religion refers to new ways of framing religious practice via the internet – online community, participative worship, virtual church and peer-to-peer contact. Exploration of these two dimensions formed the greater part of research for some time. Much of the literature exploring Helland's dimensions has focused on the US experience of mediated religion or the theoretical and theological implications of a virtual religious experience. Virtual religion is not an integral part of the scope of this project and so the US literature will not be discussed in great detail – a British project is discussed below. One point worth noting about religious rituals held online in environments such as Second Life is that they often closely mirror their offline counterparts (Hutchings 2010a).

More recently, discussion of the framing of research has taken different directions. The next sections illustrate some of the different approaches.

2.4.4 Author-focused or network-focused

Hutchings (2010b) has suggested that Helland's description is now more useful as a way to frame questions rather than describing activities, because of the blurring of

boundaries caused by the rise of new media channels over the last decade. Hutchings suggests that other descriptors such as the extent to which a medium is 'author-focused' or 'network-focused' may now form the basis of an additional and useful set of questions. An author-focused medium is one in which the 'creator maintains strict control over content, and therefore over message and presentation.' (Hutchings 2010b, p14). In contrast, a network-focused medium is one whose purpose is to foster interaction between its users. Websites and blogs fall under Hutching's author-focused classification, whereas social networking sites and virtual worlds are network-focused. The extent to which a site falls into one of these categories helps assess its purpose.

2.4.5 Four discourses and five heuristics

Heidi Campbell has written extensively on the process characterised as the social shaping of technology – the ways in which communities negotiate acceptable use of an innovation. For example, the Kosher mobile phone used in ultra-Orthodox communities, with SMS and other capabilities removed to render its use acceptable under rabbinical law (Campbell 2010b, p163). Campbell (2005) identified four discourses and the accompanying narratives which have characterised research into religious use of the internet in particular. These are:

- **Spiritual medium facilitating spiritual experiences**: whereby going online in itself can lead to a spiritual experience
- **Sacramental space suitable for religious use**: internet can become a space for activity by design, such as online church or space for prayer meeting
- **Tool to promote religion and religious practice**: the internet is a neutral tool which can be used for religious purposes as well as secular work

- **Technology for affirming religious life**: internet facilitates connections between like-minded groups.

The discourse that is most relevant to the research questions here is the third, by which:

> *The internet can be used to seek religious information and spiritual relationships or it can be used to reconfigure traditional religious activities so they can be pursued online* (Campbell 2005, p 12)

These four discourses allow for characterisations of work on religion and the internet which are broader than Helland's religion-online/online-religion distinction, although the approach quoted above is still rooted in that distinction. These characterisations also demonstrate the breadth of opinion and approach to research on religion and the internet.

Cho (2011) further defines five heuristic perspectives to 'offer insight into the interpretive lenses that are used to understand the intersection of religion and new media.' (p8). These perspectives, and examples of the research that has employed them, are given below (taken from Cho 2011 pp8-15).

- **The internet as an information transmission medium** (e.g. Bedell 2000, Horsfall 2000, Sturgill 2004) – using websites only as a method of imparting information
- **Online religion's relationship to offline religion** (e.g. Kluver and Chen 2008, Jenkins 2008) – whether online religion supplements or supplants traditional church attendance; how ritual translates to an online environment
- **Online influence on the offline** (e.g. Kim 2007) – how does the internet effect change on the way offline practices are perceived?

- **Online-religion and religion-online, the prime heuristic** – (Helland 2000) – ways in which this distinction have been applied or changed

- **Basic observations on the Internet as a medium**: the beginning and end of medium theory – research does not tackle medium theory directly, but some have used its concepts (e.g. Campbell 2005).

The first heuristic from Cho (2011), looking at websites only as a means of information transmission is that which most closely reflects the current project. This framing of the research landscape by interpretive rules gives an interesting recent insight into the ways in which scholarship has developed.

2.4.6 Three phases of research

Several authors have separately identified three waves or phases in internet studies in general and in research specifically about religious appropriation.

Wellman (2011) describes the shift as follows. For him, the first age of internet studies was dominated by 'punditry,' with hyperbole about the potential of a completely connected, always-on society. The second age involved attempts to document internet use, driven partly by the need for regulation and by commercial interests. The third, and current age, is led by a need to analyse the use that individuals are really making of the connectivity afforded.

Hojsgaard and Warburg (2005) also describe research as having proceeded in three stages. Campbell (2011) and Cho (2011) both use the 2005 characterisation of three waves as the basis for their later discussion of research into religion and the internet. These are summarised in Table 2-1 below, with quotations taken from each research paper describing the different phases in the authors' own words.

Research stage	Authors' definitions
First Wave	New and extraordinary aspects of cyberspace (Høsjgaard and Warburg 2005, p8)
	Building religious solidarity or potentially destroying religiosity (Campbell 2011, p234)
	Polarised regarding the beneficial or harmful potentials of new media (Cho 2011, p7)
Second wave	More realistic perspective (Høsjgaard and Warburg 2005, p9)
	Not simply technology, but rather people who were generating these new forms of religious expression online (Campbell 2011,p 234)
	Nuanced understanding of new media's potential for benefit or harm (Cho 2011, p7)
Third wave	Bricolage of scholarship from different backgrounds...may very well indicate that the topic is maturing academically (Høsjgaard and Warburg 2005, p9)
	Contributions from different methodologies and approaches from different disciplines (Cho 2011, p7)
	Demonstrate how studies of religion online add unique insights and help contribute to the overall understanding of life in a global information society (Campbell 2011, p235)

Table 2-1 Summaries of characteristics of three phases of research

This summary shows that the early research described in section 2.4.2 above can be characterised as first wave studies. The second wave of research includes the work building on Helland's (2000) online-religion versus religion-online dichotomy, as given in 2.4.3 above. The current project, bringing information science-based qualitative and quantitative research methods and aiming to understand how the websites are located in wider networks, can be characterised as a third wave project.

The theoretical surveys of the ways in which religion and the internet have been studied are important for locating the current work in the wider research landscape. The next sections focus on the practical research that has been carried out on related areas, showing where the current gaps in knowledge are located.

2.5   Research findings: Major world religions online

2.5.1   Pew Internet and American Life

Three studies from the Pew Internet and American Life project (Hoover, Schofield Clark and Rainie 2004, Larsen 2001, Larsen 2000) have measured the extent to which US adults have used the internet for religious purposes. Although they are US-specific, the research projects provide useful insights into how some religious activity online has been adopted. In addition, the statistics from Pew studies are reported widely in the literature.

In 2000, more people in the US had looked for religious information online than had used online banking or dating services (21% compared with 18% and 9%). The proportion had risen to 25% in later research (Larsen 2001, Larsen 2000). Hoover, Clark and Rainie (2004) suggest that 64% have engaged in activities online that are related to religion. However, this high figure could be due to the inclusion of activities such as sending religious greetings cards and is therefore likely to be artificially inflated. In contrast, a non-Pew study by Armfield and Holbert (2003) reports that religiosity has a weak but negative influence on internet use with people reporting higher levels of religiosity tending to use the internet less frequently.

Those deemed the 'online faithful' by Hoover, Schofield Clark and Rainie (2004) are more active online than other internet users, more likely to have a broadband internet connection and to have been online for longer than non-religious surfers. The level of activity suggests a large and engaged audience for the content published by religious organisations. The 2004 study also concludes that the kind of activity conducted online is distinct from traditional church attendance. That is,

'personal spiritual activities' (p5) take precedence over replicating churchgoing online:

> *...This challenges the assumption that the Internet would make it more likely for people to leave churches in favour of more flexible online options...the online faithful seem more interested in augmenting their offline preferences.* (Hoover et al 2004, p5).

Therefore, although the focus of much research has been on online religious activity, this does not reflect practice of those in the US who use the internet for religious purposes. This suggests that understanding the form and content of the kind of website that provides this complementary information and spirituality could be key for engaging people in online activities designed to expand their experience of, and commitment to, a particular church. It is also suggested by the study that online 'seeking' – searching out spiritual information – is not as widespread as has been assumed. This would have implications for website creators attempting to publish evangelistic material:

> *These findings do little to confirm previous speculations that the internet holds special appeal for those spiritual seekers looking for alternatives to conventional religious practice.* (Hoover, Schofield Clark and Rainie 2004, p11).

These Pew research projects only consider the US population, and with a high proportion of Internet users claiming to attend church once a week (41%, compared to around 6% of the British population as a whole) it may be that the audiences for church websites in the US and Britain are very different. It could be that, comparatively, the complementary use of the internet arises because there is

already a strong baseline church attendance and connectivity. Pew research suggests that religious activity is more related to augmenting offline practice than seeking online alternatives.

2.6 Megachurches

Megachurches are one part of US churchgoing worthy of note for their use of internet-based communications. A number of highly commercial, branded megachurches operate on a campus format, whereby people worshipping in multiple physical locations are joined by online activities. This is now a 'vastly successful genre of digital ministry' (Hutchings 2011, p1121). Hutchings describes Lifechurch.tv which broadcasts from one location to many by video. Online viewers see a ''mash-up' of video, chat and social media that changes the viewer's interaction with preacher and audience' (p1126). This is an example of the way that very wealthy churches use online communication to increase their influence from a single location. There is currently no home-grown UK equivalent, but Lifechurch.tv has broadcast to London locations.

2.7 English online religion

The blending of offline and online church has been on a much smaller scale in the UK. This section will explore one online church project, highlighting the English experience, as a contrast to the Lifechurch.tv virtual campus approach and the Asian megachurches discussed below.

In 2004 Church of Fools in the UK ran a short-term pilot. Its current incarnation is as St Pixels[5]. An offshoot from the successful website Ship of Fools[6], and backed by the Methodist Church of Great Britain, the experiment in online church attracted wide publicity. The project has been considered by a number of authors (Jenkins 2008, Kluver and Chen 2008, Hutchings 2007). Church of Fools ran for five months between May and September 2004. Commentary on the Church of Fools focuses on spiritual and practical elements. The legitimacy of a wholly online church within the accepted boundaries of the UK church has been considered. This has included virtual sacraments and how online interactions affect a sense of belonging and spirituality. The practical aspects of the experiment include ways that disruption could have been prevented or managed more effectively. Kluver and Chen (2008) analyse the Church of Fools based on news reports and blogs. In the same journal issue, although without collaboration[7], Simon Jenkins (2008) wrote, as creator of Church of Fools, his critique of the project's aims and objectives. His aim was as follows:

> *Just as the Methodist church leader John Wesley took his preaching out of churches and into the fields and streets in the 18th century, we wanted to take church to where people are in the 21st century – on the Net.* (Jenkins 2008, p101)

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[5] http://www.stpixels.com/wp/?page_id=34 – accessed 25 April 2012

[6] http://shipoffools.com/, accessed 25 April 2012

[7] It was confirmed that Jenkins did not work with Kluver & Chen via personal conversation, December 2010.

In this personal account of the Church of Fools, Jenkins reported reactions to the experiment.

> *Some said that a virtual church could never replace the real thing, and that it was scandalous that we were even attempting it. Others thought that the Internet was too important for churches to ignore, and that the different denominations should try planting churches in cyberspace.* (Jenkins 2008, p113)

The intention was to replicate offline church as closely as possible online. The project members had to deal with disruptive visitors who were interested in subverting the sacred space; including organised hacker and troll attacks. Virtual churchwardens had the ability to remove disruptive visitors, but were overwhelmed. In his discussion, Howe (2007) says that

> *An unfortunate and unforeseen clash of cultures meant that what for the Church's creators was a sacred space looked to many newcomers like a computer game.* (Howe 2007, p19)

The Church of Fools project demonstrated that online church based in the UK worked, to a certain degree, to bring people together in a virtual space. A guiding aim of Church of Fools was to reach those who would never approach a 'real' church. The spin-off, St Pixels, is a thriving British online community.

The idea of a virtual sacrament was discussed in the English religious media again in 2010 as a planned Twitter communion service was withdrawn after the minister involved was contacted by the Methodist Church of Great Britain (Jenkins 2010). The debate over the appropriateness and authenticity of online tools for English Christianity is still ongoing.

2.8   Major world religions

Research into religion and the internet has not been solely the preserve of North American or English academics. This section discusses research into online communication from other religious and cultural traditions. Kim (2007), Kawabata, Tamura (2007), Fukamizu (2007), Ho, Lee and Hameed (2008), Cheong et al. (2009) discuss internet use for religious purposes in Asia. Kim (2007) investigates Korean Christianity whilst Kawabata & Tamura (2007) and Fukamizu (2007) have Japanese Buddhism as their focus. Ho *et al* (2008) examined Muslim surfers and factors which influence their online activities. Cheong *et al* (2009) investigated Singaporean Protestant churches from a geographical information systems perspective. This latter study is considered in more depth in the section on content analysis of websites.

2.8.1 Christianity in Asia and Africa

In 2002 the most internet-connected country was South Korea Kim (2007). Examples of megachurch websites are discussed by Kim (2007) in this context, with a descriptive analysis of two churches. The use of pictures on websites and adaptation of European imagery is noted. For example, sheep are used on one page, despite the fact they are only seen in Korean zoos. Christian leaders are frequently referred to as shepherds or pastors. The research is an attempt to represent the churches' characteristics and explain the context, in which they are set, namely Korean Christianity. The sample of two is limited, and by focusing on the megachurches there is no discussion of how smaller, but potentially still hyper-connected, Korean churches are exploiting the internet. The discussion focuses partly on the content of the websites but mostly considers the way that the internet may be shaping religious practice and spirituality. What is not discussed is how

resources are selected, nor is the relationship between the web design and church leadership explored. Kim (2007) suggests that Korean churches are presenting themselves as a 'lifestyle option' (p219), with vast resources available over and above those related to traditional Sunday services. The churches provide an online way to understand Christianity. One key point noted is that the websites 'offer possibilities for interactive participation of believers but at the same time seek to control and limit their choices' (p220). This observation is echoed by Scheitle (2005), discussed in section 2.12 .

Hackett (2009) presents a case study of three African Pentecostal[8] ministries' websites, with particular emphasis on leadership and authority. Hackett notes that the sites include a range of resources and their presentation varies – characterising one as an information hub. Created with its Nigerian audience rather than the US backers' connectivity in mind, it is not reliant on slow-loading graphic elements. The organisations studied are large churches, similar to a US megachurch. One has an attendance of 200,000 and global branches. Commenting on sites which portray the church leaders in favourable ways and on the commodification of leaders' messages, Hackett notes that:

> *Pentecostal megachurch leaders exploit the ambiguities of the website medium to bolster their image in ways that they might not do so overtly in a sermon or crusade format.* (Hackett 2009, p500)

This is one way in which leaders' authority is legitimised through websites. Their appearance is more as a business leader, running a religious empire, than of a

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[8] Please refer to Glossary for explanation of terms

traditional pastor. There are similarities between the Korean and African megachurches' websites as both attempt to provide an entire religious faith resource within their boundaries and both show the influence of consumerism in their content. These Christian site studies, although far removed from small, English churches, help expand understanding of the wider landscape of mediated religion. There are also new perspectives and examples to be drawn from other religions, and the next two sections examine research on Islam and Buddhist practices online.

2.8.2 Buddhism in Japan and Singapore

Kawabata and Tamura (2007) discuss why levels of use of the internet, for religious purposes, are lower in Japan in comparison with the figures reported from the US (using the Pew Internet & American Life report from 2001 as reported at 2.5.1 above). One key reason given for this is that Japanese religious followers and priests tend to be older so overall usage within their age group could be expected to be lower. A second explanation offered is that religious activity is under-reported because of negative connotations to the term 'religious.' However, the level of anonymity afforded by the internet does mean it is a place where minorities or those concerned about persecution can go for information. Kawabata and Tamura (2007) point to the internet's facilitation of reciprocity and the apparent lack of acknowledgement or adoption of this ability by traditional Shinto sites. They also suggest that the physical shrine space is key to the experience, and that:

> *the superficial act of virtual shrine visits threatens to erode the dignity of this traditional shrine oriented faith* (Kawabata and Tamura 2007, p1005)

One Shinto shrine has become a focal point for online message exchange, rather than as an online pilgrimage, blending offline and online without compromising the

dignity of the shrine. It is concluded that for Japanese religious websites, Helland's (2000) online-religion label does not fit; that there are few opportunities presented for interaction with the websites, and no motivation to increase this. In contrast, their study of email counselling suggests that this fits more into the model of online-religion as it enables two- or multi-way communication not tied to a physical location. Notions of power and hierarchy are touched upon but there is no discussion as to how these affect published website content. Overall, their work suggests a fairly limited use of the web by Japanese religious followers, a situation that is echoed by Fukamizu (2007). Fukamizu suggests that 60% of the Young Buddhist Association had used the internet, and 50% of temple priests had done so too. However, only 30% of the Young Buddhist Association had used the internet for religious purposes, a figure that dropped to just 3.4% for ordinary followers.

Fukamizu (2007) also carried out a survey of priests and festival goers and the analysis of their attitudes towards religion and the internet. Results showed significant differences in the use of the internet between priests and followers and in the level of internet use and the acceptance of the mystery of religion. The first finding, it is claimed, can be partially explained by the age differences between the priests and the followers. However, the general conclusion reached is that the younger generation exhibit more critical attitudes towards their religion. It is not possible to determine whether it is the youth that is causing the critical attitude, or the exposure to the internet, but fear of this undermining of doctrinal truth or uncritical acceptance of the religious teaching and attitudes could be behind reluctance to embrace the internet.

Cheong, Huang and Poon (2011) discussed Buddhist priests' use of email and online tools to communicate with their students. The interactions are framed as priests as

strategic arbiters of interaction, choosing when to use face-to-face conversations and when to employ email. This research suggests that the acceptance of online tools has increased since Fukamizu and Kawabata and Tamura published their research in 2007, reflecting global shifts in acceptability. Indeed, by 2011 a Buddhist web forum was well established and has been reported upon (Busch 2011). The research focuses on the control aspects of the forum, questioning whether the moderators have legitimate authority to frame the discussions and content of the site. Busch (2011) concludes that although the site is framed as a sacred space, there are concerns over the transparency of that moderation process which allows moderators to enforce their own strict orthodoxy.

2.8.3 Islam in Singapore

Ho, Lee and Hameed (2008) discuss the online religious activities of Muslims in Singapore. They report that Muslims were more likely to engage in personal religious activities online, not those related to institutionalised religion. One hypothesis was that the 'interactions online may be a new avenue to strengthen internet users' own religious belief.' (p95). Of all Muslims in Singapore who used the internet, 80% had used it for something faith-related. Almost 31% had searched for a mosque near their house, and 62% had read accounts about Islam online. Ho *et al* (2008) conclude that:

> *…instead of totally substituting offline religious activities…Muslim surfers seem to be more interested in augmenting their traditional religious experiences.* (Ho et al 2008, p107).

This conclusion reflects that from the research of Hoover *et al* (2004). It is worth noting that both this investigation of Islam, investigation into counselling in Japan

(Kawabata and Tamura 2007) and megachurches in Korea (Kim 2007) suggest that internationally, and across different religions, one constant use of the internet for religious purposes is to augment offline experiences with online interaction or information, or to help integrate users into the life of a large offline church. This kind of use appears to be constant across cultural boundaries.

The next section will look in more detail at work which investigates the kind of activities that help users with this augmentation – how and why Christian churches and church leaders are using online resources.

2.9 Research findings: Specific religious uses of the internet

This section reviews work that has investigated religious use of the internet in the UK and in the US. These include studies of social media, information seeking and hyperlinks, and the effects of digital interactions on traditional authority structures. The final section considers the research documenting publication and use of church websites.

2.9.1 Motivators and search terms

Laney (2005) employed a 'uses and gratifications' paradigm (p167) to research motives for Christian web use. The study draws on previous work on motivations for watching religious television programming (Abelman 1987) and finds a number of similarities. Laney concludes that motives for going online are:

> …*the value of the power of information coupled with the anonymity that the Internet provides, as well as the community of faith that cyberspace potentially embraces* (Laney 2005, p178).

This work locates websites in a continuum of new media development, but does not assume websites are a substitute for other forms of media. Drawing comparisons with the non-interactive television broadcasting, it found some effect of website use as being motivated by a desire for companionship, but the information seeking elements of use were deemed to be more important. This is possibly another example where augmentation of religious practice is a motivator.

Jansen, Tapia and Spink (2010) present an analysis of the terms used in online searches by US users, with two major limitations. Firstly, the transaction logs are from Altavista, Dogpile and Excite, but not Google. Secondly, the logs are from 1997, 1999 and 2001. Since internet use in 1997 is very different from that in 2012, it is possible that the findings cannot be reliably extrapolated to the present day. For instance, were those using the internet in 1997 early adopters and thus are they different from the general population in profession or income? However, these limitations aside, the results are of interest for the insight afforded into religious web search. Religious-related searches represented approximately 1% of search queries and these queries were longer than non-religious searches. Of the searches conducted, the top ten in all data sets were related to traditional religions. The three most frequently used terms in all time periods were 'Christian', 'Bible' and 'Church'.

> *Most religious seekers sought information associated with established, traditional, mainstream and offline religions supporting the religious status quo, rather than challenging it.* (Jansen et al 2009, p11).

These two studies provide further support for the idea that religious use of the internet is predominantly to augment the offline experience, and not to replace it. They are 'third wave' studies – examining how people are getting on with using the internet in an integrated, everyday manner.

2.9.2 Email and ministry opportunities

Mills (2011, 2006) studied the role of email and pastoral care. The first paper investigated distance counselling in rural settings when an outbreak of foot and mouth disease restricted travel. In this, it was concluded that telephone was the best method of delivering crisis counselling as it permitted synchronous exchanges. As an asynchronous method, email had a number of flaws which made it unsuitable for anything more complicated than prayer or greetings card exchange. Mills' (2011) work, outside of a crisis situation, concluded that despite its limitations email can be used for counselling. Whilst there were restrictions on the data collection for the later work, whereby anonymisation led to a reduction in data quality, the work is helpful for highlighting an area where Christian ministers are involved in duties involving websites and email outside of the setting of a parish church. In addition, Mills studies English ministers, which in itself is of interest when the majority of similar research is concerned with US participants.

2.9.3 Authority and online religion

At least two authors have examined the possible threats to the authority of church leaders that may arise because of the connectedness of their congregations, and subsequent changed nature of the hierarchies. The study first mentioned in 2.8.2 above (Cheong, Huang and Poon 2011) examined the epistemic authority of Singaporean Protestant leaders via in-depth interviews and found a number of effects in a study of 29 leaders. The participants were Protestant, from mixed denominations, and from larger, younger churches including a megachurch. It was assumed that these younger and larger churches will be more likely to be made up of people used to using online communication.

Cheong *et al* (2011) characterise epistemic authority as follows:

> *Religious epistemic authority depends on a system of communication relations that confers on clergy a special role and status in knowledge acquisition of the divine which in turn authorizes them to issue judgements, persuasions and commands.* (Cheong et al 2011, p940)

Their hypothesis is that widespread accessibility of information via new media channels will undermine the authority of leaders and 'diminish the perceived stock of knowledge held by the elites' (Cheong, Huang and Poon 2011, p941). The pastors in the study who feel challenged by this have taken on new information roles and are becoming more inclusive in their relationships. In other words, they are increasingly marking their authority by participating online, being part of the same online space that their congregations are inhabiting. And with better knowledge of the competing religious voices in these online spaces, the pastors are able to act as interpreters for their church members, explaining more about what is heretical and why. The leaders are characterised as having moved 'from commanders to arbiters of knowledge encounters' (also p941).

The interviews were conducted in 2007-8. Although Singapore is advanced in terms of its level of online connectivity, the data were gathered prior to social networking becoming very popular and so the discussions are still couched in terms of blogs and email. It is not addressed whether the pressures the pastors reported have been exacerbated by the multiplicity of new media channels or whether the issues have become less important because of changes in technology and expectation.

Campbell (2007) also discusses religious authority and the internet. Arguing that authority is manifested via different mechanisms – ideological authority, for

example, versus hierarchical authority – Campbell discusses the ways in which different religions construct and interact with authority figures offline and online, and the ways in which online communication may affect these constructions. So far as Christianity is concerned, respondents in Campbell's study felt that their use of online tools helped them be part of a global faith movement, and that this was both a challenge and a benefit to ideological authority:

> *The internet was characterised as providing support for traditional structures, while also creating a space for critique of offline churches.* (Campbell 2007, p1050)

The interviews that formed the basis of this work were recorded in 1999. As noted in section 2.2 above, the experience of being online thirteen years later is far different: local, social networks, more multi-media resources and a wider reach. So it is possible that the contemporary experience sees a different impact on religious authority.

Turning to blogs, Campbell (2010a) also examined blogging as a process which relates to the framing of authority. Most (69%) of the Christian blogs identified were written by male, US Christians. The study investigated three research questions – what kinds of authority are referenced; are the sources of authority affirmed or challenged; what are the notable practices of bloggers?

In answer to the first research question, Campbell identified four types of authority: roles, texts, theological ideas and religious structures. By far the most commonly referred to were religious roles, but as this category included references to God and characters from the Bible this is not perhaps a striking finding (2,134 references). Only a small number of references to religious roles were challenging the authority

of a role-holder. Of the challenges to pastors, 46 of the 54 negative references were to nationally-known pastors or figures rather than bloggers' local church leaders. The research reports overwhelmingly that bloggers are affirming the current sources of religious authority with challenges being made only by a minority of bloggers. The presentation of the results does not allow for investigation of whether the criticisms are arising from a few persistent bloggers or are more widely scattered across the sample, which would have perhaps suggested a wider context for the sources of challenge to authority.

These studies of religious authority online suggest that the earlier expectations were incorrect in believing that allowing online practices as part of everyday religion would have an impact on the hierarchy and structure of the church. If the majority of bloggers are using their blog to affirm their leaders and to discuss their own Christian life, as Campbell (2010) suggests, then these dystopian views could be dismissed. Church leaders reported few incidences of authority challenges in interviews analysed by Michels (2009) which is discussed in section 2.11   below.

2.9.4 Websites

Pew Internet and American Life research examined the content and management of successful websites, identifying concerns of webmasters and providing insight into the ways by which churches maintain their sites (Larsen 2000). Of particular interest is the list of functions that church websites had implementing or were considering implementing in the future. For example, 13% hoped to implement discussion space for groups within their congregation. The research, undertaken in 2000, has been overtaken by advances in online communication and the rise of purpose-build discussion spaces like Facebook, but these are useful indicators because they show the direction websites could have taken.

Noomen, Aupers and Houtman (2011) interviewed Dutch Catholic and Protestant web masters, volunteers and paid staff, ordained and lay. The webmasters are characterised as mediators, dealing with:

> *...competing ideas, demands and conflicts regarding the purposes, contents, functionalities and visual outlooks of the websites they are working on* (Noomen 2011,p 1103)

One key point made by the Protestant web staff is that the church has so many different strands that a church site intended for everyone can only be strictly informative, explaining different viewpoints. Any attempt to provide more in-depth theological content would be divisive. In addition, the text-based nature of the Protestant tradition is felt to have influenced the design elements – there has been less emphasis on how websites are presented. There is also a suggestion that individual churches may not have difficulty translating religion 'in their own image' onto the web, (p1112), but that for wider faith-based sites:

> *religious appropriations of the Internet are not processes in which coherent offline traditions are smoothly translated into a new online context* (Noomen 2011, p1112)

So from this sample of web producers, the difficulties lying behind development of interesting and visual websites has been highlighted, at both the umbrella organisational level and also the challenges any institution would face.

Cantoni and Zyga (2007) studied Catholic monasteries and convents worldwide. A multi-lingual email survey asked communities to identify the degree of internet adoption, the kind of use and the management of their use. Using possession of email as a baseline measure, Cantoni and Zyga (2007) found variation in adoption

levels between different kinds of communities. 87.2% of monastic institutes (male) had an email address; 73.3% of independently-run convents (female) did not, in 2004, use email for communication. 90% of religious institutions managed centrally also had websites, or are thinking of them, compared to 58% of the independent institutes. It is noted that, in 2004, the internet had been in use for as long as 5.5 years in some of the communities, so was not a recent innovation (p298). This research is interesting for its global focus since so much other work looks only at US congregations. In addition, the research found no correlations between the size, age or geographic distribution of the institutes and their adoption of internet communication. One particular finding is that websites acted as shop windows to organisations in many cases (43%), without further connection, suggesting that:

> *it is rare that a Web site has a form of an Internet portal, which allows entry into virtual space on the subject of Christianity* (Cantoni and Zyga 2007, p303)

A final note of interest from this study relates to the management of communication – concluding that:

> *…technology alone, without the human factor, without promotion, without the right training and culture of use, cannot guarantee that communication exchanges take place* (Cantoni and Zyga 2007, p304)

Cantoni and Zyga (2007) located email addresses for 2,285 of 5,813 Catholic institutes and make a point that if they could not find by either Google, or official registration directories, it was reasonable to conclude that the remaining convents or monasteries did not use email. By using email as the tool to collect information they are necessarily only focusing on the institutes that are prepared to answer, and

have a working email address. There was no attempt to contact those in the majority without an email address. The reported study is the first to attempt to answer questions on the extent to which internet communication is used within monastic communities. It highlights the use of websites as 'shop windows' for these distinct institutions.

Hutchings (2010b) also refers to web sites as shop windows, suggesting their purpose is that:

> *Websites operate as a shop window and a library, offering information to visitors who want to learn more about an organisation.* (Hutchings, 2010, p14)

Hutchings (2010) notes that a successful website is an example of an author-focused medium, allowing the creator to retain overall control (p14). Smith (2007) investigated the websites of seven non-profit religious organisations in the US, such as The Methodist Federation for Social Action – organisations affiliated to mainstream denominations, but not the churches themselves. Smith's (2007) small-scale survey describes the updating frequencies, strategies and evaluation of the organisations' websites. She found that the rate of updating varied – between daily and every couple of months, and that the schedules were more likely to be determined by the events the organisation had planned. Few had formal evaluation mechanisms to monitor the use of their sites. Smith reports the majority as spending less time maintaining their site than on other communication channels, and being reliant still on printed newsletters. Finally, of the seven organisations studied, only two had a web specialist working on their online presence. The random selection of the organisations meant there is a large disparity between the smallest and largest – one has 350 members, another 1.7 million. It would have

been useful to have understood whether size was related to wealth and staffing levels and therefore the commitment towards the online communication. A wider-focused study on non-profit organisations and their sites published in 2012 suggests that this kind of organisation have always struggled with effective online communication (Lovejoy and Saxton 2012).

2.9.5 Volunteers and the law

Hoy and Phelps (2003) studied 102 US church websites and found that there were breaches of privacy security on a number of them, both in the collection of personal data and in the publication of personal information such as via detailed prayer requests. Legislation in the US is different from that in the EU, and new regulations in the EU further limit the use of cookies by websites[9]. The work highlights the need for amateur webmasters to be aware of the rules in place but suggests that in their study, people posting information on a church website were not so concerned as if it were a commercial site. The privacy loss is the same, but this is an interesting question for those operating church sites. In the years since this work has been published, perhaps people are more aware of the risk to their personal data because of more media coverage, phishing, and the rise of social networking sites. But if the attitude still prevails, it could have implications for English websites' content.

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[9] Implemented in the UK by SI 2003/2426.

http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2003/2426/contents/made Accessed 18 August 2012

2.9.6 Church websites

Hoy and Phelps (2003), Carr (2004), Sturgill (2004), Swanson (2004), Baab (2008a), Farrell (2011) have analysed the content and purpose of church, or closely related, websites, with only Carr (2004) concerned with British Christianity.

Swanson (2004) reports findings on ten websites for apostate organisations (those for people who have rejected orthodox faith). Information dissemination is the key purpose for most of the sites studied, in preference to evangelism or proselytisation. It appears from the methodology that the content analysis was conducted as part of a class project. Swanson adjudicated the results from multiple codings of websites by students, so it is possible that the findings are not strictly unbiased. However weak, the evidence suggesting that information content is the most important element of religious websites is of interest.

Sturgill (2004) focused on Southern Baptist churches, analysing websites' organisational characteristics. The underlying assumption is that 'religious institutions engage in marketing and branding like other businesses' (Sturgill 2004, p 168). There is also an examination of the concept that churches, as mediated organisations, may actually reinforce their existence as an organisation by having a website. The study looked for evangelistic information, the church as an institution, its denomination, interactive elements and links to the wider community. The presence of ideological or organisational information was also investigated. For the sample of 251 websites, organisational information was more prevalent than ideological information. This suggests churches are not exploiting the internet to its full potential as a medium for more complicated messages. 92% of churches had information on services, with 56% offering a 'plan of salvation' – an explicit message about the Christian faith.

The work is limited to one US denomination. The study is a content analysis only, and apart from one chi-square test (presence of organisational information versus ideological information) does not offer more rigorous analysis of the results than a simple descriptive list of percentages. Also, there is no follow up with the church webmasters, so it is impossible to fully understand the decision making and motivation behind the sites that have been analysed. Nonetheless, Sturgill's work provides useful detail on the kinds of information churches are publishing or omitting from their sites.

Baab (2008a, 2008b) reports on study from the US, concluding that the ideology of the church influences the messages and strategy of different websites. Baab identifies megachurches, emerging churches and liberal churches as using different website strategies and content. For instance, megachurches rarely mention 'inclusivity' on their sites, but are more likely to have a specific link for information for newcomers. The study also contains interviews with church website producers and analysis of their use of mainstream secular marketing techniques. This work extends that of Sturgill (2004), in that it examines websites from different traditions, not just the Southern Baptists. The insight given into the attitudes of the website producers also provides evidence that these websites are created with different audiences in mind. The focus is solely on US sites, and there is an assumption that US Protestantism has a different character to that of the rest of the world. However, these findings could be extrapolated to the UK if the ideology of a church was an identifiable factor.

Cheong et al. (2009) investigate the online presence of Singaporean Christian churches. Using Helland's (2000) concept of 'religion online' in a multidisciplinary setting, the study investigates virtual geographies constructed by church websites.

The application of GIS to churches is not directly relevant to the study being undertaken, but their initial investigation and discussion of the 'websphere' of the organisations under study is. It is suggested that websites are:

> ... a dynamic extension of religious news and emergent church-related information. (Cheong et al 2009, p296)

The study reports interviews with a number of religious leaders about their attitudes towards and use of the internet. It is concluded that:

> Religious leaders generally perceive the Internet as a medium for "giving [members] information" and this is consistent with the broad informational content of many websites (Cheong 2009, p299)

Cheong performed content analysis of 177 Protestant church sites. Table 2-2 below lists the categories of information that were coded for in this research. This is of particular interest because the list is directly useful for development of categories for the current project.

Religion on-line	Total (%)
Background of organisation	80.2
History of organisation	58.2
Faith beliefs/ vision	77.3
Religious services	88.7
Religious programs	81.4
Community programs	41.7
Photo gallery	37.1
Map of church	67.8
Webcast	8.5
Audiocast	47.5
Discussion forum	14.1

Table 2-2 Representation of religious organisations online (Cheong et al 2009, p296)

Cheong *et al* (2009) use the term 'websphere' in the research because it also includes the outgoing hyperlinks, mapping the virtual relationships between churches via these links. In this way they emphasise the community location of a church offline and online. The non-US focus and the interdisciplinary nature of the research help further understanding of how churches globally use websites. The term also includes the Web 2.0 elements such as blogs that are dynamic and interactive, further demonstrating the acceptance of these tools with some religious communities.

Farrell (2011) frames his content analysis of US churches in terms of online-religion/religion-online. The data collection was carried out in 2008, by which time other authors had tended to eschew this simple dichotomy. Farrell (2011) works with three hypotheses relating to the organisational use of websites, asking if different denominations use websites for different purposes. Does the level of community and political involvement vary with denomination? Do evangelical congregations reject public denominational affiliation? Do younger congregations (broadly evangelical) have more interactive websites? These questions are posed and the attempt to answer them is made by a content analysis of 600 church websites looking for three factors corresponding to the hypothesis – mobilisation, affiliation and functionality. Farrell coded the websites on an interval scale from 0 to 4, and reports the mean score on each factor for the variant denominations studied. Without more sophisticated statistical analysis of the means reported, it is difficult to judge the claim that 'even the slightest numerical difference is significant because the measurement range is so low' (p82) and thus a difference of 0.095 between two denominations may not be of note. Overall, Farrell claims support for the hypothesis that the level of content designed to mobilise political or social action varied across denominations.

Farrell's (2011) results regarding the age of congregations show the denominations on a continuum with higher functionality (interactivity) in the non-denominational, non-traditional churches and fewer opportunities for interactivity on websites of more traditional churches. The assumption here is that the age of the congregation influences the purposes to which the website is put.

Denomination is more explicitly linked to the politics and theology of a church in the US than in England. Under the umbrella of the Church of England, for example, sits a broad range of philosophies and the same is true for the other English denominations under consideration in this study. Nonetheless, Farrell's work provides further evidence for the ways in which churches use websites to communicate and interact with their congregations in the US.

In Europe, Fischer-Nelson (2012) asked Danish pastors what information they would want to see on an official church website. They wanted to see practical information, on baptisms, funerals and weddings, alongside articles on Christian faith and theology. Their concept of websites was as a way to communicate clearly Christian faith as a response to increasing secularisation.

The only existing content analysis study of English church sites is from Carr (2004), who investigated London church sites and the extent to which parishes have a role to play as information providers. As well as now being dated, the research leaves several questions unanswered. In his analysis of the Southwark Diocese website Carr states 'The diocesan website is a very good one, as far as it goes.' (p56). Unfortunately, this statement is not evaluated against any particular criteria for either design or content, only Carr's opinion: 'Navigating the site is quite easy, and it has an attractive look' (p56). Discussion of parish websites looks only at the kind of basic information that could be found on a site, and is analysed by presence/

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absence. This means there is no further insight into why particular elements have been incorporated, and the sites do not appear to be objectively assessed. However, this research is relevant as it appears to be the only prior study of English, Christian websites.

Use of email figures quite highly in the research as a key element of internet use. 95% of parishes have an email address. Carr (2004) states that with a sample size of 116 (response rate 34%) 'the results are likely to be significant' (p61) but offers no actual proof for this statement. Overall his conclusion is that email does not play a part in parish church mission. Indeed, although 48% of respondents said they were online at least once a week, Carr found a 'generally negative attitude towards the use of the Internet as a way of advancing the churches' mission.' (p67). Carr found that only 3% of parishes regularly discussed the internet at crucial meetings.

Carr (2004) does not give an analysis of the role of the Diocese as information provider, nor are the reasons behind the decision to publish or withhold information on websites explored. He also suggests that reluctance to use the internet could be down to the age profile of the clergy, but makes no reference to the 'silver surfer' phenomenon where retired people are becoming an active group online. In the US example, Hoover, Clark and Rainie (2004) found that in the US, the group most likely to use the internet for religious purposes were those aged 50-64. In the UK, internet use amongst retired people is increasing, with the over 65s as likely to look online for health information as younger people (Dutton and Blank 2011).

However, as the only existing British study, this is a helpful marker in the research landscape and foundation for the current research project. The next section examines the use of social media by religious organisations, again, from global perspectives.

2.10 Social Media

2.10.1   Facebook

Social media is an umbrella term for websites and tools that are primarily concerned with connecting individual users via a shared platform, such as a blog, or a particular service such as Facebook. Social media allows for dissemination and easy sharing of information, reaching beyond the personal contacts of church leaders (Hutchings 2010b, p16). Whilst noting that not all users become producers of content, Lomborg and Ess (2012) characterise social media as:

> …*communicative spaces in which the ordinary media user has greater potential to take control and responsibility on the communication process.* (Lomborg and Ess 2012, p170)

As social networking via services like MySpace, Facebook, Yammer, LinkedIn and Twitter has become mainstream, so research has investigated its relationship to religious communication. The changed nature of communication that is implied has a potential impact on the way that religious teaching and practice is perceived and done. The abandoned Twitter communion noted in section 2.7   above is one example of how traditional structures have been challenged via social media. One journalist has claimed that:

> *Religious groups were the original social networkers…so it should hardly be surprising that [they] have embraced Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other social networking tools in order to promote their message and reach out to their followers.* (Murray-West 2010, np)

Murray West's assertion that social media (network-focused tools) have been embraced by religious groups is reflected both in the research literature and general religious writing. In an example of the latter, (Rice 2009) highlights the ways in which social media, specifically the rise of Facebook, influences users' sense of community and purpose. It is noted that one effect is that the boundaries previously in place between leaders and the led have become 'fuzzy.' (p.128), a more popularist approach than the academic research into these boundaries as considered here in section 2.9.3 above. Rice does not propose abandonment of Facebook, but suggests methods by which its influence can be controlled. What is also of interest is the inherent assumption that Facebook is not going to decline noticeably in popularity in the future. Rice is writing less from an academic, neutral point of view but as one advising church leaders in the US on how to use, control and understand Facebook. In several places the language - even reflected in the book's subheading 'How the Hyperconnected are Redefining Community' – is more reminiscent of the first wave of internet studies where hyperbole outstripped reflection and ultimately reality. This is also true of another US work, (Hipps 2009) which argues that technology is having a detrimental effect on faith communities. For example, in an opinion that echoes that of Christians (2002), Hipps says:

> *The Internet is a lot of things, but it is emphatically not a neutral aid. Digital social networking inoculates people against the desire to be physically present with others in real social network…Being together becomes nice but nonessential.* (Hipps 2009, p115)

These two books are included in the review as examples of contemporary commentary showing how some church leaders see the potential effects of social

media. Later empirical evidence suggests that Hipps' and Rice's assertions are not being realised in current experiences.

Johns (2012) and Lomborg, Ess (2012) researched religious Facebook use. Johns observed the interactions on a range of global Facebook groups for different religions. He noted very little ongoing interaction on the group pages, with one posting a month typically being the level of participation in 2010. His conclusion is that users are signing up to Facebook groups not to engage in conversations online, but as a way of signalling their religious identity as part of their Facebook profile – a less far-reaching and revolutionary use of the technology than Rice or Hipps would suggest.

Lomborg and Stine (2012), in the same volume, describe a case study of a Danish church's use of Facebook. In particular, they focus on the online friending behaviour of one of the pastors, his view on this and his congregation's views. The viewpoints from the Danish church, which is described as more mainstream, and the attitudes towards media and religion are opposite of the patterns in the US. They conclude that the Facebook interactions amongst church members are best suited to maintaining weak-tie relationships, not usurping but augmenting regular contact via other communication means. The pastor who befriends congregation members is aware of his self-presentation on Facebook: on the one hand, being able to present himself as a 'normal' person is a benefit, and being aware of the congregation's daily concerns via their interactions on the site provides him with far more detail than could be gleaned from brief Sunday morning conversations. On the other hand, some congregants prefer a greater distance between themselves and the pastor in order to maintain professional authority (p184). This small case study

presents one of the first attempts to describe the social media relationships between church leaders and their church members in a European context.

2.10.2 MySpace

A recently published (2011) article investigates data from an older, and now less popular than Facebook, networking site, MySpace. Researchers compared MySpace profiles, and the information given there on religious affiliation, with data from an unconnected survey on their faith activities (Bobkowski and Pearce 2011). It was concluded that the religious outlook of young people did not necessarily translate online, in that those identifying as evangelical were no more likely to post religious information on MySpace. Also, users may identify as religious in their profile, but there was no evidence that people spontaneously talk about religion in wider online conversations on the site. This finding reflects the pastor quoted in Michel (2009) who asked, following a well-used Christian sermon question, whether if people were arrested for being Christian, would there be enough evidence for a conviction from their online presence.

2.10.3 Blogs

Publishers of blogs invite users to comment on their posts or to link or share from their own blogs. In this way a network of related blogs can be built up with users exchanging comments. Cheong, Halavais and Kwon (2008) claim that blogging can be viewed as a new religious practice. This is distinct from the online-religion interactions documented in the late 1990s. Cheong *et al* (2008), further discussed below, say that for church leadership:

Blogging develops proximal spaces by annihilating relational distance

between the pastor and readers while maintaining the pastor's moral

authority as a gatekeeper of religious knowledge (Cheong et al 2008, p296)

It is worth noting here that Cheong *et al* do not envisage that blogging as a practice would undermine the pastor's authority. Whilst a minority of blogs are well-read, the blogs in Cheong, Halavais and Kwon's sample receive little traffic and make up part of the 'long tail[10].' The research comprised a content analysis of 200 blogs with religious content. The content found in the blogs is given below.

Type of content	Number of blogs
Personal religiosity	44.5%
Didactic content	39.0%
Criticism and social issues	15.5%
Co-ordination of practices	7.0%

Table 2-3 Cheong et all 2008: Types of religious content appearing in blogs

The study also analysed the links posted by religious and non-religious bloggers, finding that there is a 'Christian A-List' of sites and other bloggers that are linked to which parallels the secular 'A-list.' Cheong *et al* provide two relevant points:

Religious bloggers are operating outside the realm of the traditional nuclear

church as they connect and link to the mainstream... [and] major parts of the

religious blogosphere ...still reflect the influence of traditional religious

experience. (Cheong et al 2008, p125)

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[10] http://www.longtail.com/the_long_tail/2005/09/long_tail_101.html (accessed 11 January 2010)

Individuals blog about their traditional church attendance. This further reinforces the idea that online religion is not subsuming place-based church but rather, religious people are integrating the online communication into their everyday practice and augmenting their offline churchgoing experience. The ubiquity of blogging as a practice is reflected in the publication of 'how-to' books for church leadership; citing examples of good and bad practice. Bailey and Storch (2007) claim, with echoes of the hyperbole that surrounded early studies of internet and religion:

> *Blogging has radically and permanently changed ministry…* (Bailey and Storch 2007, p64)

If blogging has changed ministry, it has also affected congregations. Stewart (2011) presents a case study analysing the contributions made by British female writers on parachurch sites. One evangelical church in Stewart's study expressed concerns that the internet was a disruptive medium. Concern about access to 'aberrant or damaging' content (p1212) meant:

> *Many of the women…restrict[ed] the sources that they go to for Christian teaching to those that are directly recommended by senior members of the church.* (Stewart 2011, p1212)

These senior members would naturally be male leaders. Stewart's participant, Katie, from this church used her personal blog as a forum to develop her teaching, in a way that was not permitted in the physical church because of strict gender division. All the women were using blogging as a way to find a voice that was otherwise marginalised in their home church. This shows how online participation allows individuals to augment their religious experience. Stewart's (2011) research echoes

the claim from Cheong (2008) that bloggers are operating outside of the mainstream church.

In addition, Campbell (2010) (as discussed in section 2.9.3 above) found that for a number of bloggers the motivations lay in one of four categories, the most popular being a desire to share information about Christian living. This too is a way of augmenting the daily religious experience of both the blogger and their readers. So one theme emerging is that online work has a secondary role to play in religious life.

2.10.4   Twitter

Lovejoy, Saxton (2012) include religious organisations in their study of how non-profit organisations use the microblogging site. They claim that sites like Twitter and Facebook allow organisations to easily interact with their stakeholders in ways that were difficult with only static websites. Hutchings (2010a) shows how Twitter is used by people involved in Lifechurch.tv to communicate and enhance the experience during the rest of the week.

Cheong (2012) presents a commentary on Twitter use for Christian religious purposes. Creation and spreading of memes around statements of faith, and faith branding, are the two uses of Twitter which are explored. There is less focus on the possible relational side of Twitter-based interactions. Although the ability to convert a weak tie into a strong relationship exists, for the church leaders under consideration Cheong (2012) suggests that the ties develop into 'attachments' p199, not necessarily relationships – and that the leaders use Twitter to push for more consumption of their media output as well as physical participation in their church. In terms of faith branding, Cheong suggests that Twitter can help

'commodify' religious experience. Her discussion focuses on the corporate use of Twitter in the US, but concludes with calls for wider research into the ways that this kind of online contact is integrated into religious participation.

2.11 Information seeking

The previous sections examined literature concerned with religious use of services designated as social media, which is generally accepted to be driven by user-generated content. This next section looks at literature examining the information-seeking, rather than content-generating, habits of church leaders – another area in which no UK studies have been published.

Lambert (2010) outlines a case study on the information seeking habits of US Baptist ministers. He identifies several roles that ministers adopt which influence their information needs: administrator, preacher and counsellor. As 'preacher', the ministers are themselves information providers and turn to a number of sources, offline and online, with the internet a popular source of information. Defining the internet as a single source, however, fails to acknowledge the vast range of online resources. There is a difference between a site such as Biblegateway.com, offering authoritative versions of the Bible, and a blog written by a lay person such as those analysed by Cheong, Halavais and Kwon (2008) or wider, more informal social media sources such as Twitter. This work is evidence that in the US, at least, pastors have no hesitation in turning to websites for information. It was also noted that the leaders in the case study agreed that it can be hard to assess what is useful online.

van der Laan (2009) offers a cautionary and critical view of the use of websites providing resources for sermons and in some cases off-the-peg sermons for

download. Whilst acknowledging that many will rely on websites for sources of information, he suggests that:

> *Religious life changes not for the better but for the worse when the Internet becomes not only the default but the first source to turn to for something so important to Christian religious life as the worship service and the sermon.* (van der Laan 2009, p275)

The implication here is that the internet is a detrimental force, weakening the role of church leader, rather than a force for good. In a direct response to van der Laan, (Michels 2009) presents an ethnographic analysis of involvement with the internet for preaching purposes. This work highlights how the internet makes unorthodox points of view far more accessible than would have been in earlier years, quoting a pastor as saying:

> *…materials from variant viewpoints are now accessible… 'ten years ago you wouldn't have stumbled upon that–it wouldn't have been in your local bookstore.'* (Michels 2009, p172)

For the specific church leader in this study:

> *His role as the 'centre of Biblical truth' for the congregation has changed, and theological positions are more frequently challenged based on information found online* (Michels 2009, p172)

These themes of authority and challenge to orthodox views relate to those in section 2.9.3   above.

Michels' (2009) initial response is interesting despite being a limited case study of one leader. That leader uses the internet but not uncritically. Although aware that

not all information on the internet is reliable, his judgement is based on his understanding of what follows his orthodox point of view. So despite there being a vast range of different viewpoints easily accessible, only information which confirms the minister's current thinking is used. Michels (2012) investigated the information seeking behaviour of five leaders of a Canadian Baptist church. In this study, leaders used a variety of information sources for both church- and everyday life-related problems: Google, social media, people, books and television as well as prayer and the Bible. In principle these leaders took the same view on selection of sources as the earlier, lone participant in that they cited orthodoxy as a key criteria. In fact, the 2012 paper repeats the same point exactly about 'stumbling across books' as the 2009 work, so it is reasonable to assume both papers report on the same congregation. Michels (2012) reports that the 'respondents also seemed comfortable selecting resources from outside their theological tradition' (p21) including some that are not generally regarded as orthodox. These two studies have taken an ethnographic approach to understanding how Canadian church leaders solve information needs.

An email survey asked Danish pastors how they used the internet (Fischer-Nelson 2012). As an email survey this would only reach those who are actively using the internet. The results show that there is a great deal of online searching. 81% of the sample used the internet almost every day for work purposes. Table 2-4 lists the top activities performed online. Blogging and Facebook are minority pastimes whereas information search, Bible lookup and sermon inspiration are well-established tasks for which Danish pastors seek solutions online. Fischer-Nelson (2012) reports that 88% of pastors say the internet has had a positive influence on their work (p122).

Online activity related to work, in past 3 months	Percent
Sent/ received emails	99
Searched for information	96
Found inspiration for a sermon	86
Looked up passages in the Bible	66
Found prayers for use in the church	35
Been on Facebook	17
Written on a blog	4

Table 2-4 Danish Pastors' online activities (Fischer-Nielson 2012, 121)

For Park and Taylor (2007), ministers deemed 'elite' made up the research population in this study of the resources ministry professionals used. The respondents are termed elite as they are recipients of study grants, therefore it is claimed the ministers are highly-educated. It is noted that the ministers all used the internet as a source of knowledge – human capital, as it is described. Gender and racial differences in use of resources were also found, but the key finding is that for this research group, the internet was used more than in the general population.

The PICTURE project from Università della Svizzera italiana (USI – Lugano, Switzerland) in collaboration with the School of Institutional Social Communications of the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross has, since 2009, collected data on the use of the internet by Catholic priests. Participants are only those who are users of the internet, so the research does not allow for investigation of reasons of non-use. Of the sample of 4,992 priests, 94.7% were online daily. Only 8.7% had never searched online for homily (sermon) materials; 41.6% said they thought digital technology has improved their 'priestly mission'. These figures suggest that within the global Catholic Church, if leaders have adopted online communication, a significant minority are finding the tools of benefit (Cantoni et al. 2012).

Although none of these studies reflect the experience of English leaders, and the majority of participants covered are male, they help to contextualise the experience

of all church leaders balancing widely-available information, that which is orthodox, and their roles as preachers and information providers.

2.12 Hyperlinks

The final section of this review specifically looks at the ways in which hyperlinks have been studied in the context of religious websites. Hyperlinks leading from one website to another are deliberately chosen, and can help establish the ethos of a website.

Haas and Grams (2000, 1998) have raised a number of issues relating to hyperlink analysis in wider research, not just that which is concerned with religious websites. Their original aim was to develop classifications for hyperlinks following relatively traditional methods. However, their concern with facilitating understanding of the context of a hyperlink makes the work useful background to that which currently considers the 'semantic web.'[11] The work describes possible categories for links, but also suggests that all links can be collapsed into either being a recommended resource or a navigational aid. (p100). It is also suggested links help contextualise a page for the reader. In Haas and Grams (2000) the authors state that:

> *For nonfiction pages whose general purpose is to be informative, it is reasonable to assume that the author wishes to make the organisation and information on the Web page or site clear and easy to understand.* (Haas and Grams 2000, p182).

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[11] http://www.w3.org/RDF/FAQ (accessed 8 January 2010)

This assertion is behind their expectation that tools that would increase the information that a hyperlink can offer would enhance the users' experience of a site. Their 1998 work contains a call for more research into the producers' viewpoints as decisions are made regarding content and positioning of hyperlinks.

Scheitle (2005) attempts to define boundaries around online church presence. Scheitle's hypotheses relate to the theological position of the church – whether liberal or conservative – and the number and type of hyperlinks used on each church site. He argues that a more conservative church website will include more links to more types of content, as the conservatives believe that there are few external unapproved sources that adequately meet the informational needs of the congregation. Conservatives see ecumenism as a threat. A liberal church will, on the other hand, include fewer links because they deem more external sources to be acceptable. Scheitle finds that the theological position does influence the number and categories of website links. The educational attainment and income of the congregation also influence the number of links a website will include. This work is of interest for two reasons. Firstly, by enumerating the categories of links that were found in the sample of churches, the current research project is provided with a framework for analysing English church links. Secondly, although the analysis is of the hyperlinks rather than website content analysis it provides more context for the study of church websites and their location in the online community. The list of categories is given in the table below.

Links to official denominational sites
Links to other congregations or religious groups
Religious resources
Religious media
Parachurch groups e.g. Promise Keepers
Politically motivated religious sites
Religiously affiliated educational institutions
Commercial sites selling religious goods
'Other' religious sites

Table 2-5 Link categories from Scheitle (2005)

This element of website construction, the use of hyperlinks, is one which webmasters use consciously or unconsciously to help identify the character of their site. Along with the level of interactivity, other written content, design and layout, links are part of the way a site is conceived and published. All these elements have been considered in the research literature to a greater or lesser extent and form part of the research landscape in which this project is located.

In a later work, Smith, Scheitle & Bader (2012) note that there has been little further investigation of outbound links from church sites, and perform an analysis on non-denominational US churches. The pattern of links suggests that apparently independent churches are actually connected via a hidden network of third-party sites.

2.13 Conclusion

Current literature concerning use of religious information online shows the development of research from the first wave of highly theoretical work assuming that technology would inevitably reshape religion. The second wave, which focused more on people than the technology, is also being passed as more analysis and more collaborative work is being produced. More notice has been taken on the ways in which online activities have influenced non-Western religions. The rise of social

networking has in some cases led to publication of statements that have more in common with the hyperbole from the late 1990s 'first wave,' but there has also been serious scholarship investigating corporate and individual use of social media. Information seeking and information publishing have also been investigated, although there are few studies which explore the English experience. A common theme is of religious use of the internet to augment rather than replace traditional, in-person religious experience.

The literature review has established the importance of a need to investigate the specifically British or English use of the internet for religious purposes. This project will fill this gap in the research landscape, exploring how online tools are being adopted at local, parish level.