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Forum: Electronic Media and the Study of American Religion

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Forum

As a regular feature of *Religion and American Culture*, the editors invite scholars to comment from different perspectives upon an issue or problem central to the study of religion in its American context. This FORUM format is designed to foster the cross-disciplinary study of religion and American culture and to bring to the readers of the journal the latest thoughts of scholars on timely, substantial topics. Contributors to the FORUM are asked to present brief essays or “thought pieces” instead of carefully documented articles.

Electronic Media and the Study of American Religion

During the past two decades, the burgeoning of electronic and digital technology has made an impact—some might say of revolutionary dimensions—on the way we communicate with one another, retrieve information, teach our students, interact with our peers, and even, perhaps, on the basic ways we experience and interpret “reality.” In short, electronic media have the potential to transform our communities of learning in significant ways.

For this issue of the FORUM, we have invited several prominent scholars involved in the study of religion in North America from a variety of perspectives to reflect on the ways in which these technological developments have affected how they approach the tasks of information gathering, interpretation, and communication. The World Wide Web makes it possible to access virtually unlimited amounts of information, much of it about religion, with a few clicks of the mouse.

Beyond the task of information gathering, the possibilities of electronic media point to possible transformations in the ways in which knowledge is communally generated and shared. Have new communities of learning been engendered by these media? Have relationships between faculty and students and among researchers been transformed? Do we, individually and collectively, still think about our subject matter in the same way, or have we taken a leap à la Marshall McLuhan—who argued famously that “the medium is the message”—into another dimension of conceptualization?

These are the questions to which we have asked these scholars to bring their own experience and reflections. We hope that it will help promote further discussion on these matters throughout the discipline.

JOHN CORRIGAN

As I write this, scanning machines are humming away in the New York Public Library, translating aisles of books into digital text that virtual patrons can access from remote locations. This same process soon will take place in libraries at Stanford, Harvard, Oxford, and other institutions that likewise have partnered with the search engine company Google to make chunks of their collections available to a global readership. The eventual scale of this program assumedly will be vast, and its effect on learning significant. It can be expected to accelerate currently visible trends in research, interpretation, and the dissemination of scholarship that have emerged in consequence of advances in the technology of electronic media. Not the least of those trends are online scholarly mining of primary sources and surveying of secondary literatures. More impressively, enhanced inventories of online textual resources serve to more securely ground virtual communities of investigators, escalating expectations for scholarly debate and collaboration and emboldening inquiry.

Over the course of the last decade, several visionary projects have proven themselves to be a salient part the future of academic research about religion and American culture. *The Making of America* collections assembled by the University of Michigan and Cornell, the JSTOR journal archives, the *American Periodical Series Online*, *Archives-USA*, *Early American Imprints*, and a panoply of sites having to do with visual and material cultures have pioneered the construction of electronic databases and information access and retrieval. The immediate and direct consequences of the availability of searchable databases of primary texts through sites such as these have been the easing of protocols normally prerequisite to fruitful research (travel to collections and archives, hours of unrewarded reading in order to locate a nugget of relevant data, cramps of the hand), enriched discussion among investigators, and the ratcheting up of expectations for scholarly publication.

Those who flourish in academe enjoy reading and writing. Even the most passionate detectives, however, tire of tracking a rumored lead through a half-dozen libraries, a basement or two of cartons, and across an international border. Online archives do not decertify the traditional scholarly enterprise of archival research. They do, however, constitute a fast track to determining if some projects are

doable. That is, the search apparatus available to users on the best sites can track a word or words quickly through a collection and deliver a list of writings in which it occurs. Researchers accordingly are positioned maximally to survey a collection without having to practice trial-and-error reading, to ferret out leads by slogging through title, author, and subject data, indexes, tables of contents, catalog briefs, and numerous sample chapters in pursuit of clues to the contents of some body of writings. By engaging primary sources electronically, scholars can expeditiously estimate the likelihood that a set of texts will yield data relevant to a project, and, thus forearmed, they subsequently can choose to invest their time in reading the footprints of the past in the conventional fashion: through methodical combing of texts for ideas expressed in various vocabularies and events reported in various ways. Such methodical scrutiny of sources also can proceed electronically, of course, but not in ways much different from handling paper publications. The more fortunate researchers will be able to reach their study objectives largely by reading, or otherwise viewing, what is displayed on their screens. The student of religion and the Revolution, for example, can build a strong base for a project by reading from the online digital Evans edition. In short, the most obvious ways in which online collections have altered the process of research are by making it easier for scholars to map their research preliminarily and by bringing sources, the mountain, as it were, electronically to Mohammed. Writing as a devoted patron of many an archive where some of the most interesting materials are not likely to be rendered digital for decades, I note that online research nevertheless is generally only one part of a plan of study. But it is an important part, and an exciting part.

Secondary literature, to an increasing extent, is available online through sites such as JSTOR and MUSE, and in the form of digital books, which are showing up more frequently in library catalogs. Some of the benefits of this availability are obvious, and all have to do with uncomplicated remote access to searchable collections. At some point, however, scholars will have to force debate about whether the system as it now stands is inconsistent and political—in that many journals are left out of the electronic loop and therefore less utilized—and whether and how that inequity in the long run diminishes scholarship.

Electronic communication, especially as e-mail, list serves, and blogs, has revved up scholarly conversation over the course of the last decade. Crucial to such conferencing, however, has been the proliferation of Web sites that post writings, images, audio, and video that serve as reference points for those conversations. Discussion and debate among academics, whether electronic or face to face, typically

develops in relation to writings, images, or events that have in one way or another become "public." If such things were not public, there could be no public discussion of them. The Internet facilitates the "publication" of ideas and opinions, texts and pictures, charts and tables, music and graphics, and other data that ground discussion. Week-long conversations among scholars on H-AMREL in many cases begin with reference to an event, a recent publication, or a historical figure. Persons who wish to contribute to the conversation, but who are unfamiliar with the turns it is taking, in many cases can easily access texts referenced by other discussants or read about an event online. They can also track the discussion back to its beginnings, because the various opinions offered on such sites are in essence published statements. More importantly, there is an assumption undergirding such exchanges: communication is founded on equal access to the ideological artifacts that lie at the center of the discussion. That is, identification with the totalistic "world" of the Internet trumps other affiliations, so that it matters little whether one has physical access to a Research I library or a county library, or whether one lives in New York or in Guam. The world of the Internet, with its myriad kingdoms of digital collections of books, articles, newspaper reports, encyclopedia entries, reviews, and other texts—equal access to which amounts to equally legitimated status of all discussants—binds the participants to one another through those digital collections. The technology of electronic contact between scholars, therefore, is only half of the equation leading to communication. The other half is in the shared store of electronically coded cultural data that references such communication, or, to be more precise, a shared faith in the sufficiency of that base. Framed in this way, the academic exchange of ideas through the electronic media appears as much an exercise in identity-building as collaboration in the interests of producing knowledge. Both are salutary outcomes.

Recent administrative fascination with a commercial lexicon indicating the rationality of "delivery of instruction" to "clients" in educational "markets" has translated into curricular initiatives involving "technology-assisted learning," "distance learning," and the "electronic classroom." All of these systems are in experimental stages, although some institutions are experimenting more widely and aggressively than others. It is clear that technology in the classroom is here to stay, and the question of the advantageousness of student utilization of computers and Internet connectivity has been settled for some time. What is less certain is how technology can be adapted to classroom use in a way that advances curricular and program agenda while not undermining proven methods of instruction, especially those that exploit critical response, collaboration, and debate. Some

years ago, I traded my slide trays and overhead for an LCD projector in the hope that I could streamline the presentation of materials supplemental to my lectures. I embedded images and texts in PowerPoint and left it at that. Over time, I added more portraits, graphs, maps, cartoons, and so forth and eventually decided to embellish all of it with a few words or lines in connection with the images on each of the frames. My experience is that this has preserved the lecture format, allowed openings for discussion, and left students thinking room to react critically to my presentations rather than preoccupying them with text loaded upon text that they attempt to notate in their binders—or laptops. My blind advance into technology-enhanced instruction thus leaves me with the impression that learning is served by a few bells and whistles judiciously situated alongside the spoken word. I know others who have reported their own experiments in crash-and-burn narratives.

When students surf the Net in search of sources—or ideas—for writing assignments, the case regarding technology becomes complicated. Plagiarism is the stale lead into most academic conversation about this. The significant topic, particularly for its long-term implications, is student unpreparedness to sort Web sites into categories of reliable, unreliable, partly reliable, or just inappropriate. I recently received a long e-mail from a seemingly bright student correcting me on my presentation of Catholic history in America. She had obtained the “right” version of that history, including the meanings of doctrinal statements, from thoroughly partisan screeds published on an official-looking Web site and was surprised when I suggested to her that her source was defective. Likewise, several years ago, a student dropped my course in a huff after I explained that she could not prove the existence of witches and, therefore, substantiate Cotton Mather’s early claims for the nature of events at Salem by citing from an online source sponsored by a coalition of anti-Satanist activists. As persons who oftentimes are just learning about academic standards for argument and evidence, undergraduates typically struggle as they attempt to sift the contents of Web sites that present themselves visually in styles that suggest legitimacy. With regard to the consequences of and opportunities arising from Internet access, I believe that students’ compasslessness when it comes to navigating to reliable sites discloses problems more serious than plagiarism.

Graduate students, and especially those whose projects have a strong historical component, can claim a great advantage in exploiting the Internet for its potential to furnish them massive stockpiles of primary sources. I have observed that in many cases, however, the consequence of this kind of research is less a settling into a pattern of

research-by-keystroke than the whetting of young researchers' appetites for digging up their own treasures from undigitized and far-flung collections. In the same way that the video-rental business has resulted in such a cultivation of a public taste for movies that theaters now do better business than previously, so too do junior researchers seem to have developed a liking for physically surveying twenty or thirty shelf-feet of manuscript boxes from their simplified experience of online primary source reading. I have a sense that graduate students "get" primary sources more quickly than my grad school peers and I when we were at their stage in our training.

All of this data—what's a scholar to do? Why, interpret it, of course. Online access on the whole has made scholarship a more economic process by reforming the data-gathering phase of research. Research that twenty years ago took money (to travel) and time (to search the old-fashioned way) now requires less of each to assemble an equivalent body of data, at least for some projects. While granting that the primary contribution of some scholarship will be more detailed data, we ought to expect some return on interpretation for effort saved in research. There is room for the freer play of theory in scholarship about religion in America, a golden opportunity to complicate and broaden the stories we tell and, perhaps, to bust a few paradigms along the way.

I anticipate momentum in several areas of the academic intersection with electronic media. The first of these are continued inventiveness in the organization of information on Web sites and innovative patterning of the search environments that enable electronic retrieval. Leading the way in this regard are ventures such as that undertaken by the electronic library company Ad fontes, which has placed online hundreds of texts having to do with both Protestantism and the Catholic Reformation. The Ad fontes site provides for standard word searches, but, most impressively, it authorizes searches by topic: all of the texts have been scrutinized and indexed by scholars so that a user can search for writings bearing on, for example, the theological topic of "reprobation," or the social/cultural topic of "rebellion and revolution," or both. Also at the forefront in this regard is the Electronic Cultural Atlas Initiative (ECAI) at the University of California, Berkeley, which utilizes custom-designed Geographic Information System (GIS) software to display cultural data as maps, all through a free Web site that enables complex, interactive searches. In the classroom, I expect to see more laptops. Distance learning in the short run will establish a more secure beachhead in higher education, but the returns are still out on this enterprise. I personally think it flawed. Conversely, I daily thank whatever goddess rules the world of e-mail for her making possible collaborations in editing, writing, conference

organizing, and all of the other long-distance activities that I commence from my office. Lastly, I am somewhat begrudgingly coming to accept the inevitability of increased e-mail contact with students. I am almost persuaded that that sort of consultation improves learning. But sometimes I just wish that they would come by the office, sit down, and chat with me about our favorite blogs.

DAVID MORGAN

The modern history of education is in no small way the history of technologies of learning. In the middle of the nineteenth century, public school and Sunday school teachers were urged by enthusiasts of the blackboard to incorporate this device into daily teaching because seeing words bolstered hearing and remembering them. As the century passed into the next one, a familiar pattern of advocacy ensued. Educators argued that teaching needed to keep pace with modern visual media and popular practices of visual consumption in order to engage modern youth most effectively. Photographs, lantern slides, film, film strips, television, and video were the successive objects of technological enchantment among many educators. The advocates of technology insisted that devices as simple as writing on the blackboard connected with students and held their attention and brought the literacies of common life to the classroom, thereby exploiting entertainment and commerce for American democracy's pressing task of public education.

And now the Internet and the computer's accompanying array of electronic technologies. I recall about a decade ago my university's lead cheerleader for such media standing before a roomful of faculty, holding aloft a few CDs and announcing with aplomb: "Here are Plato, Aristotle, and Ovid. Can you believe it? Everything they had to say, right here in my hand." I didn't believe it, nor did most of my colleagues. Many of us assumed the university's Director of Electronic Information was secretly funded by Bill Gates or Big Blue to promote the campus-wide consumption of their goods. Whether or not that was true, the administrator's faith in technology was typically American; but so was the faculty's skepticism. Technology and its mass media command great power in American mythology because they have a way of promising a new age of ease and comfort, and they quickly naturalize themselves as a kind of second nature. Think of the way we rapidly assimilate new computer programs or systems—we absorb them as rapidly as we forget the old ones. Technology is in the business of creating anachronisms. And so is commerce, which is an important reason why the two work together so well.

A comparable rhythm of new and old animates the history and practice of education—and scholarship. It is just this rhythm that makes the current boom in electronic media so worthy of scholarly analysis. Teaching a healthy skepticism about media is vital to the critical educator's job. If avidly embracing technology is characteristically American, so is the practice of skeptical regard for it among intellectuals, artists, sci-fi writers, and filmmakers. Both impulses seem appropriate. After all, most scholars would not relish returning to electrical (let alone mechanical) typewriters. By the same token, a computer whiz recently extracted a host of hidden spy-ware from my laptop, which only heightened my wariness about uncritical dependence on technology.

With this conflicted regard for electronic media in mind, I would like to proceed in two ways. First, to examine at a gallop a number of important resources and uses of the Internet for the study of religion in the United States; and second, to train a critical eye on some of the assumptions I've seen emerging among students and scholars, assumptions that need to be interrogated in order for a reflexive, critically mindful use of electronic media in the study and teaching of American religions.

I. Opportunities

Whatever else they may be, the Web and the Internet are suppliers of bewildering amounts of information. The ease of access to digital archives, encyclopedias, collections of images and music, blogs (Web logs), and Web pages present teaching and scholarship with an embarrassment of riches. There is far more information available than one could ever use. This is, of course, no different from the traditional research library, stocked with mountains of periodicals and books that no single scholar could ever scale. But the advantage of electronic media like the World Wide Web is that students, teachers, and scholars located far from such libraries are no longer hindered by their geographical isolation. Combined with interlibrary loan, electronic catalogs open up distant resources and make many of them physically available.

A wide variety of resources are available on the Web to support the study and teaching of American religions. See, for instance, the large site maintained by the Wabash Center, <http://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/internet/front.htm>. Religion On-Line (<http://www.religion-online.org/>) contains more than 5,200 articles and chapters on such topics as the Bible, Theology, Ethics, History and Sociology of Religion, Communication and Cultural Studies, Pastoral

Care, Counseling, Homiletics, Worship, Missions, and Religious Education. The Virtual Religion Index at the Rutgers University Religion Department (<http://religion.rutgers.edu/vri/>) offers diverse connections. Among the largest resources is the directory operated by Google, which lists more than 100,000 links to "religion and spirituality" Web sites (http://directory.google.com/Top/Society/Religion_and_Spirituality/). Yahoo offers another aid—http://dir.yahoo.com/Society_and_Culture/Religion_and_Spirituality/. As of January 2005, this site lists links to more than 40,000 Web sites organized in fifty-two categories, a sample of which signals the texture of religion today: categories include topics such as "angels," "creation vs. evolution," "church-state issues," "demons," "pilgrimage," and "religion weblogs." The largest category is "magick" (209 sites).

Convenience has a significant impact on the study of certain aspects of religion. Whereas access to and use of informants, images, and music have been complicated or even precluded by physical limitations, e-mail and the Web help a great deal. Online ethnography makes contact with religious informants an attractive possibility, and it is something students can readily conduct by direct contact or by participation in Web forums or Internet listserves or by studying blogs. The use of images and music has always been hampered by the logistics of access, permission, and reproduction. Increasingly, photographs and artifacts are being cataloged and stored online, making browsing from one's own computer terminal possible. Ordering, shipping, and reproducing electronic images are greatly facilitated. Using Power-Point to display images eliminates the costly, slow, and mechanical procedure of making slides. Images can be captured at no cost on the Web or scanned from a reproduction, shared among colleagues around the world, and, with proper permission, used in hardcopy or virtual publications. The use of sound and music is more possible than ever and can be easily incorporated into lectures and visual presentations. Like images, audio tracks can be imported from the Net or Web, stored on a hard disc or CD, and used in the classroom at no cost. Most Web pages offer archives of images and a link for requesting reproductions as well as arranging for permission and payment. A brief selection of online resources for images of American religions includes the Library of Congress, <http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/catalog.html>; the Pluralism Project at Harvard University, <http://www.pluralism.org/images/index.php>; the Cities and Buildings Database, <http://content.lib.washington.edu/cities>; the American Religion Data Archive, operated at Penn State, <http://www.thearda.com/>; and the Religion News Service, <http://www.religionnews.com/> (go to link for "photos and images"). Perhaps the largest digital source of art imag-

ery is ARTstor (<http://www.artstor.org/info/>), a browsable data base of more than 300,000 images with a dedicated search engine. Access is by institutional subscription.

One of the most important developments in the recent study of religion is the emphasis placed on lived religion and the daily practices that give religion its prosaic and ritual presence in human life. The Web offers yet another form of access to lived religion in the scrutiny of personal Web pages, blogs, and the meandering, flaming, and testimonial forums and chat rooms that connect religious seekers, peddlers, diarists, evangelists, and polemicists. Because the medium of e-mail is epistolary and the Web journalistic (recalling the posting board of the castle door at Wittenberg, where Luther allegedly nailed his provocative 95 theses), one finds that religion on the Web is in a state of becoming. Electronic media, therefore, capture religion on the move. A number of excellent Web sites operated by news organizations provide timely resources and the ability to explore current topics of living religion in the classroom. Some of the best sources are the religion and ethics page of PBS (<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/>) and the page of the Religion News Service (<http://www.religionnews.com/>).

The Web is wherever Internet computers are speaking HTML, which means the Web and its Internet host wrap around the globe, consisting of computers and networks on every continent. Type "American Buddhism" into a search engine, and you'll gather a harvest of sites maintained around the world. Moreover, the sources on the Web will document a global trail of Buddhisms that have found their way to North America. The result of searches for "American" religion on the Web is invariably good at getting American faculty and students to think in global, intercultural terms because the Web underscores and perhaps clarifies as never before how the nation-state is being redefined in our age—by migration, capitalism, transnationalism, and by media such as the Internet. American religions are not (and never really were) strictly national in nature and scope.

Finally, group research projects have become a popular and effective form of research in recent decades. Not only has the Web facilitated the collaboration of physically distant colleagues, Web sites have become a primary form of conducting as well as disseminating research. Many projects offer pages for colleagues, students, and journalists to monitor findings and interact with researchers. A scattering of these pages offers superb resources for researchers and teachers of American religions: the Resource for Media, Religion, and Culture, <http://www.mediareligion.org>; the International Study Commission on Media, Religion, and Culture, <http://iscmrc.org/>; the

Center for the Study of Religion and Media, <http://www.nyu.edu/fas/center/religionandmedia/index.html>; the Material Religion Project, <http://www.materialreligion.org/>; the Pluralism Project, <http://www.pluralism.org>; and the Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture, <http://www.iupui.edu/~raac/>.

II. Desiderata

If the Internet began as a networking of computers for scientific application, it went on to flourish for commercial reasons. Everyone online has something to sell, which often means oneself. This should alert scholars, teachers, and students to the prevailing ethos of self-fashioning on the Net and Web. Electronic media are highly flexible and subtle forms of representation, inventing and reinventing with astonishing speed a great variety of rhetorics of self-presentation. This often means lying, deceiving, exaggerating, and concocting. Groups and individuals create Web pages in which they control the presentation and content of information about who they are, or wish to be perceived as being. The critical educator must alert students to proceed with care in regarding religious Web pages. Of course, the manipulation of representation is nothing new, especially in the domain of the cultural practices of religion. And the tendency of mass media to commercialize religion, making consumption a fundamental part of religious behavior, did not begin with electronic media. But the Web page of a religious group easily shows how belief participates in an overarching fashion system. Encouraging critical awareness of this among students, scholars, and media consumers of religion is more necessary than ever in the age of electronic media.

Any critical study of religion and contemporary media must take up these definitive challenges. The first law of media is that any medium tends inexorably toward autonomy, as if driven by the need to be authoritative and universal. At some level, media aspire toward invisibility and self-forgetting. Media consumers commonly prefer this because they analogize print, broadcast, and virtual media to their own perceptual faculties. Just as the eye is supposed to be able to see (and see accurately) anything worth seeing or the ear hear (and hear faithfully) whatever is important to know about, media such as television, newspapers, and the Internet strive for omniscience. Their capacity to do so is nonsense, of course, but the human tendency to make media a kind of second nature, to expect them to report exactly what exists and needs to be known, is virtually instinctual and must be regularly disturbed by critical intervention lest deception become unchecked and institutionalized (which happens with shocking ease

and regularity). The convenience and speed of electronic media—watching wars, protests, or disasters as they happen—changes the nature of the events and our relationship to them. It behooves scholars of religion to engage in substantial reflection—ethical as well as epistemological—on the implications of the new electronic media of Internet and satellite-assisted broadcast for the public perception of religion, especially religious “others.” Mass media rely fundamentally on the currency of iconography, that is, on visual and auditory shorthand devices or stereotypes for representing groups, places, ideas, forces, and institutions. Americans learned in the media cloud arising around 9-11 and such disasters as the Oklahoma City bombing that this mass-mediated iconography is quickly established and goes far to shape public perceptions of and attitudes toward such events, indeed, goes far to shape and interpret the events qua events. For better or worse, in other words, media are a faculty of knowledge and feeling, rudimentary forms of the social construction of reality. Understanding what that means for the study and teaching of religion today is surely an urgent task.

A second pressing concern for scholars of religion is the nettlesome difference that electronic media make in defining religious community. De-naturalizing electronic media reveals that they are commonly imbricated upon other, older media and that they are intimately connected with nonelectronic religious practices. One of the worst conference papers I ever heard tried to argue that the Internet signaled the death of traditional, “real-world” religious communities. Anyone who has bothered to observe how believers of most sorts actually use the Net or the Web knows that they integrate such media into a larger set of religious practices in ways that recall the integration of any other once new medium such as radio, telephone, video, or recorded music. Blogs, for example, act as public diaries in which authors reflect openly and interactively on real-world events as well as on personal matters. But publicly posting one’s personal hopes and tragedies predates blogs: Robert Orsi studied the practice in women’s devotion to St. Jude (*Thank You, St. Jude*, Yale University Press, 1996), and letters to the editor of religious publications and the circulation of open letters by clergy clearly anticipate the communal effects of blogs. Religious community is an elastic social fabric that incorporates many media and behaviors of belief into a complex weave of practices. The challenge confronting religion scholars is to discover the variety of ways in which different practitioners today are inserting electronic media into their repertoire of communal activities. How are blogs used, for instance, what difference do they make, and how should we study them? It is crucial to understand that most people don’t live

online but pop in and out of virtual engagement and that Web users are always generating new protocols to structure various modes of interaction online. The fears of parents, moralists, clergy, and educators that the medium will swallow up young people and others are often (but not always) overblown.

Every new medium arouses anxieties. It is helpful to realize that most users apply Internet and the Web for task-specific purposes to bolster off-line social relations and not as a replacement of them. Nevertheless, the scholar of religion ought to be interested in the anxieties generated by electronic media among the traditional purveyors of religious belief because this is part of a recurring pattern in the history of religions. If we are to understand the significance of "Web culture" in contemporary religions, we should attend to the fears that shape its reception, often in very material ways such as parental monitoring devices placed on computers, V-chips in televisions, rating systems for recorded music and video games, and so forth. The history of media in the United States is also a history of censorship, moral suasion, religious indoctrination, political activism, social legislation, and educational policy.

MARK SILK

On the afternoon of September 11, 2001, I gathered together the 6-person staff of the small research center over which I preside—three Ph.D.s, one administrative assistant, and two undergraduate fellows. Since 1997, we had been publishing *Religion in the News*, a thrice-annual magazine dedicated to looking at coverage of religion by the news media, and the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon promised to yield a number of significant religion stories worth following. For most of what we do, existing electronic databases of print and broadcast news, most notably Lexis-Nexis, are sufficient, providing reasonably comprehensive access to the country's larger newspapers and national broadcasts. But for the immediate aftermath of 9/11, I was interested in seeing what the coverage looked like in the country's smallest dailies, which are not archived in the available databases and which, in some cases, do not make their own electronic archives available for love or money. In the event, each person in the office was assigned a few states, and, for the better part of the week, we tracked local coverage of 9/11-related news in all the little dailies in those states via their online editions.

The results were of more than passing interest. Beginning the next day, there were stories offering the views of local religious leaders, accompanied by announcements that churches and other places of

worship would be specially opened for people who wanted to come to pray; it took a few days, but in due course people picked up the cues and, for a few weeks anyway, attendance at religious services bumped up. Meanwhile, in community after small community, as if on cue from civil religion headquarters in Washington, interfaith services were mounted, and in such a way as to include the full range of available faiths. Particular efforts seemed to be made to include Muslims; imams were much in demand. All in all, with a few hours of clicking at keyboards, we were able to assemble a portrait of the national religious reaction to 9/11 in a way that only a few years ago would have consumed months of traveling around the country to look through acres of newsprint lodged in libraries and newspaper morgues. And in the course of the weeks that followed, we proceeded to relate what we found to larger themes in American religious history. As church attendance sank back to normal levels, for example, editorial writers and columnists began to complain about backsliding and the need for a real religious awakening in America. The more things change . . .

To say nothing else, access to the news media on the Internet has made it possible for interested investigators to conduct, in real time, a species of historical inquiry into the current state of our religious culture. The question is: Will this quantum leap in access to source material alter the doing of “real” religious history, and, if so, how?

In one sense, what we now have at our fingertips is nothing new under the sun. Ever since the Great Awakening, when Benjamin Franklin covered George Whitefield’s first northward peregrination in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, newspapers have been an important source for American religious history, and historians have had recourse to them to tell their stories. Nowhere, indeed, is this more the case than in the history of urban mass revivalism; in constructing a narrative of news coverage of religion in America, I was able to make good use of biographies of Finney and Moody and Jones and McPherson. The authors of these books were helped, of course, by knowing the itineraries of their subjects and could select the microfilmed journals to look at (if microfilm there was) by date. But in traveling through the nineteenth century and on into the twentieth, the number and size of newspapers grows so quickly that it becomes harder and harder to wade through the chaff in a focused search for relevant germs of information on religious topics of interest. In her important study of Mormons in the mind of America from 1860 to 1960, Jan Shipps used Poole’s Index and the Reader’s Guide to assemble a comprehensive collection of articles to analyze—but that’s to say she limited herself to looking at articles that appeared in magazines. No

comparable reference works exist for the daily press, and so tracking coverage of the Mormons in American newspapers would be a labor of Herculean proportions. Whether an analysis of such coverage would significantly alter or enrich Shipps' account of the public images of Mormonism is, of course, an empirical question that remains to be answered.

Newspapers have, in short, been an underutilized source for religious history, and to the extent that electronic databases make them more available—and, above all, searchable by keyword—they will bulk larger in the stories historians have to tell about our religious past. Since the history we write is always dependent on the sources we have and their accessibility, it is likely that those drawn to twenty-first-century American religious history will not be so interested in exploring the more intimate reaches of private religious practice. Diaries and personal letters (in hard copy) have ceased to be written, and e-mails will fade into the ether. The assemblage of permanent databases of other sorts of electronic records—personal Web sites and blogs—may take hold, but these sources will have to be seen as at least semipublic communications or cries for attention.

In any event, greater reliance on journalism will require historians to gain a clearer sense of the strengths and weaknesses of this mode of discourse as source material, including, above all, an awareness of how newsrooms function and how news judgments are made. What appears in a daily newspaper is not equivalent to what is going on of significance in the world; it's always necessary to understand why some stories are singled out for coverage while others are left unattended. This may seem to be an obvious point, but it takes a disciplined mind not to equate the daily paper naively with the *histoire événementielle* of one's time. As a former journalist, I have been struck with how little understanding even academics who study news coverage often have for the ways and means of news organizations.

That said, it needs to be recognized that the revolution in electronic communication began to affect the practice of journalism some years before the rest of the world began to depend on computer screens for news and information. By the late 1980s, editors in newsrooms across America had acquired instant access to stories from the major news wires even as they were editing their own reporters' copy. I can recall times when, covering the 1988 presidential campaign for the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, I had to explain to my editor why the story I proposed to write was so different from the ones that were being filed by my opposite numbers at the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* and the *Chicago Tribune*. Being continually aware of the approach being taken by other journalists—even before what they

write becomes available to the public at large—means that a common story line tends to be established more quickly than in the past. In other words, that first draft of history that journalism claims to supply is now more coherent, more cast into a single interpretive frame, than used to be the case. This makes the job of the historian at once easier and trickier. The more coherent the narrative, the easier it is to embrace or to subject to revisionist attack; but the price of coherence is that important elements of the story that fail to fit the narrative—that suggest entirely different narratives—will be left out of account and perhaps forever lost to the historian coming along years later. A less coherent set of first-impression news stories might serve scholars better. Under the circumstances, those studying the late twentieth century and beyond may need to work harder to dig out what has been left unreported.

Meanwhile, the trajectory of coverage of significant news stories itself becomes all the more important to trace. In an era of electronically induced herd journalism, examining how and why a story slowly gathers weight, acquires critical mass, and then explodes into public view before disintegrating becomes critical for understanding how the culture conducts its business. In fact, it has been the principal business of *Religion in the News* to trace the trajectories of significant religion stories. What we do amounts to what might be called the first draft of American religious historiography; for, in the course of an ongoing story, the journalistic point of view shifts and changes, focusing on one element of the narrative or another, such that by the end certain analytic conclusions will have emerged for all to see—right or wrong.

Let me conclude by turning to what I assert is the biggest religion story in the history of the American news media: the Catholic priest pedophile—or, more accurately, the bishop pedophile cover-up—scandal of 2002–2004. This was a perfect storm of a media event in which the role of the new electronic realities should not be overlooked. It began in the usual way of major investigative stories, with a newspaper—the *Boston Globe*—dedicating a team of reporters to investigate an apparent pattern of wrongdoing. At its height, it was a story that only caution forbids me to call unique in the annals of journalism. It was intensely local, with reporters at daily papers across the country hard at work scrutinizing the behavior of the leader of the local Catholic diocese. It was national, with the National Conference of Catholic Bishops under unremitting journalistic pressure. And it was international, with attention paid both to parallel scandals taking place in dioceses around the globe and to the ongoing response of the Vatican. Short of an all-encompassing event like a war, a pandemic, or a worldwide economic crisis, stories do not get much bigger.

A few of the electronic dimensions of the story are worth noting.

- Because all newspapers are now accessible online, a paper like the *Boston Globe*, with no regular circulation beyond New England, was capable of striking fear into the hearts of newsrooms around the country. As the story grew, *Globe* reporters fanned out across the country, pursuing articles on former Boston priests and archdiocesan officials exiled or transferred or promoted to bishop in other dioceses. That a reporter from Boston could scoop you on a scandal in your own back yard was a humiliation to be avoided at all costs.
- At a critical point in the story—the gathering of bishops in Dallas in June 2002—the *Dallas Morning News* published a searchable database of alleged episcopal malfeasance that suggested that there had been cover-ups in no fewer than two-thirds of American dioceses. Based largely on an assemblage of reporting from newspapers around the country, such a database could not have been put together in journalistic real time prior to the electronic news era.
- Early in the story, the Poynter Center began posting links to the day's collection of news stories on clerical sexual abuse from newspapers around the world. There can be little question that the ability of news professionals and the interested public to keep track of the avalanche of coverage helped keep the story going. (Thanks to the commitment of Kathy Shaw, the religion reporter at the *Worcester Telegram and Gazette*, Abuse Tracker continues to this day, now under the auspices of the *National Catholic Reporter*.)

The bishop pedophile cover-up story will certainly come to occupy a significant place in the history of American Catholicism. How significant a place will depend upon what changes in the behavior of the institutional church and of the Catholic laity appear to flow from it. But any serious effort to come to terms with it will have to reckon with the critical role that the news media played—for unlike, say, the Second Vatican Council or John Paul II's confrontation with the Communist leaders of Poland, this was an event in the life of the church that came about because of journalistic scrutiny. Thanks to electronic databases, a huge portion of the coverage will be readily available to any historians who care to read it. How much of it will they read? What narratives will they piece together from it? How will they integrate it into the larger story of the church in America? How will its sheer bulk affect their telling of that story? And how will they

calibrate the impact of the electronic availability of the coverage *at the time*. While I am far from a technological determinist, I do believe that the revolution in electronic information will profoundly affect the writing of American religious history, and in subtle ways that we can now only dimly perceive. Over time, we can hope, we will come to see through that glass a little less darkly.

RHYS H. WILLIAMS

Developments in electronic media have had significant effects on the way I do my job. Some of these affect the gathering and production of scholarly knowledge, others affect the way I teach and students learn. Still others have implications for the global community of scholars. Drawing on my own experiences as a scholar, a teacher, and an editor, I reflect on how these changes have affected my job, my work, and my thinking.

Changes in the last decade in electronic and digital media have meant a significant increase in the *quantitative* speed with which words, pictures, messages, and information can be retrieved, transmitted, and cataloged; similarly, there has been a quantitative increase in the reach and scope of such media, putting more of these words, pictures, and information into more people's hands in more different locations. At the same time, there are *qualitative* differences in the mix of media available, and they may well be transforming how we learn, teach, and communicate—perhaps even how we experience and practice religion itself.

Without taking any particular credit for this, the span of my career to date and some of my specific experiences as a scholar have given me a particular angle on these changes. I began graduate school in 1982. At that time, I wrote papers longhand then typed them up on an electric typewriter, using Wite-Out for corrections. Within a year, I learned to use the word processing functions available on the university's mainframe computer. The advantage of immediate electronic storage, editing, and then reproduction of papers, exams, and the like was quickly apparent. However, the nearest terminals connected to the mainframe were in the departmental computer lab, a communal space that made it difficult to use the computer to produce papers directly. Thus, I still used the computer basically as a typewriter, bringing in already composed pages to type into the computer.

Within the next couple years, desktop computers began to arrive in some faculty—and the occasional graduate student—offices. I worked on a project funded by an external grant and, thus, got a relatively early desktop—with two floppy disk drives using 5.25" disks (that

really were floppy). One needed a “boot disk” in one of the drives to start the computer and then another disk with a word processing program on it. Such computers were expensive and, consequently, something of a collective resource. As computers became more common and capable of recording more information faster, I noticed that my papers began to get longer—the ability physically to produce and reproduce a sixty-page paper became almost indistinguishable from that needed for a typewritten paper half as long.

When I took my first tenure-track job, in 1989, I was the first person in my department to receive a personal office computer as part of my job offer package. By that time, both statistical and word processing programs fit easily on a desktop computer’s hard drive. Given that my data were also now stored on easily transported diskettes, I could produce academic papers wholly within my office.

But to share those papers, I still needed to print or photocopy extra copies and then mail them to colleagues or to journals. Electronic mail was just developing in the early 1990s, and e-mail programs were a bit cumbersome to use. They could only send messages between sites and, of course, required a computer to be hardwired to the university’s mainframe to be active. Thus, while I could communicate to colleagues who had e-mail accounts themselves (it was far from universal, however), I again needed to go to the department’s computer lab to send and read my e-mail. Individual faculty offices were not wired for e-mail or Internet access until the mid-1990s, and electronic file attachments did not become routine until the mid-to-late 1990s.

Now I can often do all the work needed to produce a scholarly paper without leaving my office. My own data are stored on CDs, and the analysis and word processing programs are on my desktop computer. I do the literature review by accessing academic indexes and sources through the university library network, then I find the journal articles I want through JSTOR. Through Internet searches, I can find leads to popular media stories that may be relevant or reviews of books I am curious about or books or periodicals that do not physically exist in my university library. And after writing the paper, I send it as an e-mail attachment to journals. Moreover, I don’t really need to be in my office to do this. My desktop computer at home is capable of similar feats. And if I want to spend the afternoon in my local coffee shop, I can do all of this with my laptop through a wireless network—sitting next to the Gen Y folks writing screenplays or “TM”-ing each other through their phone cameras.

I can produce longer papers more quickly from more varied and dispersed sources, and distribute them to more people in more different places, in half the time it used to take. I can write, edit, and

communicate while I am traveling, or I can do so even while on vacation; I never need to meet face to face with a co-author when collaborating, and I don't need to sit around waiting for the mail. Whether I am physically in the office or not, I don't need to be away from the means of academic production.

I have noticed that the increased rate of message and response has affected relationships with students. My classes are all tied together through the Blackboard Web program at the university; students can e-mail me with a question while it is still a hot topic in their minds. But I notice that they also sometimes get impatient at not receiving an immediate response to an e-mail query (even if said query comes at 1:00 A.M.). Indeed, the increase in the technological means of scholarly production has certainly not been a "labor-saving" advance for me personally. Standards have risen along with the increasing rate of production, with the number of publications once considered adequate for tenure now almost a necessity to get a job in the first place. And there is often the expectation that I always be available—because I *can* be. The phrase "24/7" is beginning to describe an academic's weekly work schedule—an increased rate of production and extraction of academic labor power that would have Karl Marx exclaiming, "Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose!"

But are those papers I am producing faster any better? Am I any smarter as a teacher? Is the quality of the products worth the increasing rate of production? And how would we know? I write and read more, faster. Is the output "better" or qualitatively different in any way? If so, how is academic output now different, whether the evaluative assessment is positive or negative? Please indulge a bit more personal history as the setting to address these thoughts.

I have served two different stints as a journal editor. From 1996 to 1999 I co-edited *Social Problems (SP)* a sociology journal published by the University of California Press. *SP* received 275 to 300 submissions per year, and we had four people working on the journal in our office. I began to edit the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion (JSSR)* in 2003. *JSSR*, a multi-disciplinary journal, is published by Blackwell Publishing and receives a bit more than 200 submissions per year. The office staff is a doctoral graduate assistant and me.

The changes in just four years between 1999 and 2003 were extraordinary. Our postage costs are dramatically lower at *JSSR* than they were at *SP*, as at least half of our reviewers want to receive the articles electronically and even more return the reviews that way. We return copies of the reviews and decision letters to authors and reviewers with PDF files. Even more dramatic is the simplicity of getting accepted papers to the press for publication. I send the press a

CD with accepted articles on it in a standard word processing program. The “page proofs” come back as a link to a Web site.

The electronic/Internet revolution in publishing is so significant one wonders about the future of print journals—which, in fact, are a decreasing proportion of university library budgets. On-line journals are increasing in number, if not yet appearing in prestige or citation rankings. The electronic capacity to gather and analyze data, produce scholarly papers, and distribute them efficiently has made the production and dissemination of ideas a much faster world.

The extension and increased speed of electronic media has changed other parts of my job as well. As an editor, I am acutely aware of the extent to which the Internet has decreased the distance among scholars around the world. Academic work is becoming globalized; at *JSSR*, I have received papers from Canada, Western and Eastern Europe, China, Israel, Malaysia, Mexico, Iran, Bangladesh, Turkey, Singapore, and Australia. In many places, so-called snail mail is not just slower but inconsistent and unreliable. And yet scholars in these places learn of *JSSR*, submit their papers electronically, and want the decision information the same way.

But beyond speed and scope, research is also becoming internationalized. The most prominent example that I see regularly are papers with data from the World Values Survey. The WVS is distributed in at least a dozen-and-a-half countries, not all of them in the developed world. Bracketing questions as to whether survey questions from so many different cultures and researchers is actually comparable, cross-national comparisons are becoming more common and the basis for social scientific theorizing. Data from traditionally Christian countries can be compared with data from predominantly Muslim countries. Along with data and conceptual matters, Western social scientific methods are spreading as well. I recently received a paper from a scholar in Qom, Iran, who is working on developing a psychological scale for religious orientation with particular application to Islam. While I have personal reservations about the need for more psychological scales for the study of religion, the paper did alert me to a vibrant debate going on among Muslim scholars in the Middle East and Iran as to whether there are universal dimensions to religiosity that can be studied through adaptation of Western methods or whether Islam exists uniquely.

Paradoxically, this increasingly worldwide reach of the Internet has brought me papers from all over, but it also reinforced to me that there are such things as national or perhaps regional academic cultures. Whatever one’s own epistemological predilections, a sociologist in the United States is familiar with a certain presentational style.

I now think of that as a particular “Anglo-American empiricism,” and it is certainly not universal even among social scientists who use surveys and other quantitative methods. Dividing the world into “theory,” “methods,” and “findings” is absolutely alien to scholars in other parts of the world. At the same time, American reviewers often struggle as papers from non-European authors open with flowery introductions and numerous references to grand philosophical traditions that seem only slightly represented in the empirical analysis at hand.

These differences have led me to think more broadly about scholarly standards. For example, are papers from Islamic nations evaluated as to the quality of their work by the standards of their own societies and academic cultures or by standardized Western criteria? If the former, am I the best judge (and as a practical matter, where do I find reviewers?) for deciding what to publish and will the journal’s primary readership want to read it? If the latter, is that a type of cultural imperialism that serves to hinder transcultural scholarly conversations rather than to foster them? The liberal mythology that glorifies the idea of the Web bringing everyone into contact with each other implicitly assumes that we are all alike in some fundamental ways—it imagines a “universal” person. It may well be that the media—and the methodology—are manufacturing that universal person, not just reflecting and expressing it. Something will surely be lost as well as gained.

Thus, the qualitative implications of these changes may be even more profound than issues of speed and scope. The increase in visual images—as opposed to text—available through electronic technology has changed the way many people learn and, often, the way we teach. Our students expect the Internet to be available to them, they depend on it—especially on search engines that do much of the work of finding information for them. They do not necessarily expect, or want, photocopied handouts of the syllabus, assignments, or the like; those can be posted on a Blackboard site and downloaded at the students’ leisure.

Issues of quality with Web-based resources are significant. The ease with which students find “sources” online (not to mention pre-written papers), the incredibly wide range of sources, and the “democratic” access to posting on the Internet makes much of the “information” available of dubious quality. It has increased the urgency with which we must teach students how to evaluate the sources and information available. Libraries can no longer act as our gatekeepers for the scholarly community. The world is at their fingertips, for better and for ill, and we cannot escape a responsibility for teaching how to discern the wheat from the chaff.

Further, students want—and perhaps need—different media in order to learn effectively. Electronic media such as television, video, and films have produced a visual and iconic generation. The linear, and often restricted, analysis dictated by the prose essay does not resonate easily with students weaned on quick-cut visual imagery, allusion, and symbolic ambiguity. And when one is teaching religion, this may be particularly important. The rich visual and auditory cultures of religion are important to convey. Pictures and recordings can bring some experiences home. And yet they don't substitute for the words needed to explain their significance. My students often ask for more "visual aids" and tell me "a picture is worth a thousand words." When I respond that not every thousand words is of equal quality and importance, they surely see me as a Luddite old dog unwilling to learn new tricks.

And perhaps I am. There is no denying the power of the visual, as New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina made clear. But beyond the emotional reaction, what was communicated by those images? I think that the role of sociology is to clarify and to delineate carefully the distinctions among different ideas, events, and people. Precision, in analysis and expression, is a laudable goal. Visual images—with their richly evocative nature—seem to achieve the opposite. They resonate to the extent that they promote ambiguity in interpretation, they work when they elicit emotions, not analysis. They are best when they hit the gut—and to transform that into a lesson for the head requires the thousand linear words that the aphorism above derided. There was no denying the power of seeing so many black people so destitute after Katrina—race and class entered the political vocabulary, at least for a time. But the nature of institutional racism and the policies of urban neglect that produced the New Orleans devastation are not captured in a soundbite or a photograph. One could argue that it is exactly our visual culture that will allow those who helped set the stage for the tragedy to escape having to deal with the full consequences of their actions.

I may well be on the wrong side of history on this issue. When I look at the journal *Visual Sociology*, for example, I see interesting and often moving photographs. But I also need text to discover what the author intended to communicate with the photographs. And I still have standard social scientific questions about representativeness and the like. In much the same way that I am questioning what "Islamic" social science looks like, I haven't yet figured out what visual sociology is, let alone how to discern good visual sociology from bad visual sociology. I am reasonably sure it must go beyond the aesthetic analysis of the photographs themselves, but I don't know where that is.

In sum, the academic life is faster than it used to be. It is wider ranging in its scope. More is available, more of the time. The quantitative challenge presented by this electronic expansion has resulted in increased expectations and higher standards in terms of quantitative measures of production. To me, the jury is still out on assessing the challenges associated with the qualitative changes. I may here be committing the too common error of assuming my generation or time is unique, facing social change that no other cohort had to accommodate. But it seems undeniable to me that the American academy is changing in significant ways. And it is an open question what the scholarship of our forebears may have to tell the next generation, whether professor or student, about how to navigate this institution.