

Bajan

A&M Communication: Research Spotlight

Bio: Adam is a 2nd year PhD student from Vancouver, Canada. His research focuses on institutional authority and decision making in the context of digital religion. Specifically, he is interested in how religious group leaders reflexively orient themselves to developments in secular communication media prior to shaping these media for purposes of efficiency in worship.

Title: *Bridging the Gap: The Deterministic Influence of Digital Media on Pastoral Authority*

Description: In 2015 the Pew Research Center released a landmark longitudinal study entitled *America's Changing Religious Landscape*. Results confirmed what pastors and priests throughout America had known for some time; that the Christian share of America's population is in decline and that the number of Americans identifying as religious is also dropping. But within this trend is a surprising statistic: affiliation with the evangelical Protestant tradition actually increased by roughly two million in the last several years. This brings the total number of American evangelical Protestants (denominational and non-denominational) to an estimated 64 million and growing. While there are a number of factors behind this demographic shift, one in particular links them all together: a rise in the use of digital media by religious practitioners, both in and outside of the church environment.

This ever-increasing use of digital media in religious environments results in the barriers that previously separated on and offline lived religious practice becoming bridged, blended, and at times, blurred. In turn, scholars have proposed a number of theories to explain how religious organizations adopt and shape media in order to facilitate worship within this digitally mediated context or 'digital religion' (Campbell, 2012). Many of these theories are rooted in a social shaping of technology paradigm which affords agency to religious organizations and their leaders who are responsible for ensuring a safe future for their churches and congregations. My

Bajan

research aims to connect a social shaping of technology approach to media development with a soft-determinist perspective in which media, as extensions of human beings, exert an ecological influence on religious group leaders, one which occurs prior to the social shaping of technology process. In so doing, I hypothesize, religious leaders reflexively orient themselves to developments in communication technology (media) originating in the world of the secular. The uniqueness of my research is that it attempts to connect two very different approaches to the study of how humans interact with media in their environment and in so doing, demonstrates how humans and media evolve along side of one another in a co-dependent relationship of interconnectivity.