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CULTIVATING ONLINE AND OFFLINE PATHWAYS TO ENLIGHTENMENT

Religious authority and strategic
arbitration in wired Buddhist organization

In light of expanding epistemic resources online, the mediatization of religion poses questions about the possible changes, decline and reconstruction of clergy authority. Distinct from virtual Buddhism or cybersangha research which relies primarily on online observational data, this paper examines Buddhist clergy communication within the context of established religious organizations with an integrationist perspective on interpersonal communication and new and old media connections. Drawing on in-depth interviews with Buddhist leaders in Singapore, this paper illustrates ways in which priests are expanding their communicative competency, which we label 'strategic arbitration' to maintain their authority by restructuring multimodal representations and communicative influence. This study expands upon previous research by Cheong et al. (in press, Journal of Communication) and finds that constituting Buddhist religious epistemic authority in wired organizational contexts rests on coordinating online–offline communicative acts. Such concatenative coordination involves normalizing the aforementioned modality of authority through interpersonal acts that positively influences epistemic dependence. Communicative acts that privilege face-to-face mentoring and corporeal rituals are optimized in the presence of monks within perceived sacred spaces in temple grounds, thereby enabling clergy to perform ultimate arbitration. However, Buddhist leaders also increase bargaining power when heightened web presence and branding practices are enacted. The paper concludes with limitations and recommendations for future research in religious authority.

Keywords religion online; authority; strategic arbitration; Buddhism; communication studies; cyberculture

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Rethinking cyberfaith and religious authority

New media have been accompanied by ostensible changes in authority structures, including new professional warrants and alterations in how expertise is communicated from the elites to the masses (Marvin 1988). Recent debates have questioned the changing nature of authority alongside mediatization processes (Livingstone 2009) including the 'mediatization of religion' as religious activities thrive in mediated environments and representations (Hjarvard 2008). As faith practices become more accessible digitally, one significant question concerns the construction of authority within religious communities.

In this paper, we examine how religious authority is enacted in the context of religious organizations, drawing from interviews with religious leaders in Singapore. While a few studies have examined how Buddhists have adopted the internet for faith resources and interactions, this literature focuses on virtual communities apart from considerations of the broader landscape of established religious institutions and their growing web presence. For example, studies have examined the emergence of Buddhist resources online (Ostrowski 2006) and organizational structure of the 'cybersangha' with no physical home (Prebish 2004), or compared online with offline rites (Frost 2007). Online Buddhist interaction is juxtaposed against offline realities as the internet is 'the imagined locale where people can find alternative spiritual sanctuaries with few speech restrictions' (Kim 2005, p. 141). Busch (2011) examined the Buddhist message forum, E-Sangha, and concluded that the founder and moderators discursively and structurally shaped the web environment as a sacred community; she also recommended for future research to engage in interviews and ethnography that would help situate online observational data amidst users' perceptions of religious authorities in offline communities. Thus, as much of the small corpus of literature on mediated Buddhism has focused on virtual groups, an important research limitation is a lack of theoretically meaningful studies and fresh primary data to understand the conative developments of religious authority within cadences of everyday religious life. Correspondingly, previous research then has oversimplified or negated the influence of Buddhist clergy authority, which limits our understanding of how religious organizations adapt to the changing architecture of mediated information and practices.

We examine temple Buddhist leaders whose epistemic authority is typically treated as being undermined by the onslaught of pluralistic sources online. Here, epistemic authority is understood as a communication order linked to performances that manage knowledge including informational control of situations associated with the role (Meyrowitz 1985; see below as well). Epistemic authority of the Sangha (Buddhist monastic order) refers to authority derived from priest's expertise as teachers of the Sutras (religious scriptures) as they systematically disseminate the Dharma and meaningful interpretations of human existence and goals (attainment of Nirvana) (Chia 2009). Authority of Buddhist clergy is

said to be displaced by non-monastic authorities such as webmasters, 'the religious specialists or "virtuosi" (Weber's terms) for giving definitions, taking the place of monks as disseminators of knowledge' (Taylor 2003, p. 294). Fukamizu (2007) argues that the authority of Japanese Buddhist monks have eroded as their followers develop critical attitudes and entertain doubts about traditional doctrines from electronic forum chats. As such, the tendency in extant studies has been to treat Buddhist clergy as being traditional and rigid, cloistered in structures which fail to digitally engage with contemporary followers. In effect, studies need to investigate dynamic authority performances where alternative modes of religiosity may prod Buddhist leaders to regain credibility by defending old practices and employing new acts of authority connected to the appropriation of communication technologies.

This paper aims to reveal through an interpretative lens how contemporary religious authority is communicatively constructed and relegitimized as clergy have been characterized as threatened by secularization and religious privatization (Norris & Inglehart 2004), proletarianization and deprofessionalization alongside increased lay scepticism and demystification of theological expertise (Dawson & Cowan 2004). While these countervailing processes may have altered, to some extent, the organizational basis by which religious leaders gain epistemic authority, we suggest that agentic practices via strategic arbitration of fragmented expertise and experiences online and offline enable clergy to regain the legitimacy and trust necessary for their work.

Prior research on Christian leadership by Cheong *et al.* (in press) documented how Protestant clergy faced with epistemic threats emanating from online and other competing ideologies were able to manage these threats by acquiring new competencies as strategic arbitrators of online information and encounters. Pastors invoked creative stratagems to enhance their credibility as religious instructors by, for example, growing their media representations and influence via sermon publication, webcast production and participation in social media. This paper builds upon previous research: we (a) move beyond a focus on Christian communication by investigating the epistemic authority performances of the relatively understudied Buddhist clergy; (b) examine how online and offline communications – typically cast as competing behaviours in religious organizations – can be managed to tell a more complete story of how priests deal with epistemic threats by reorienting followers to mentoring relationships and corporeal rituals; and (c) consider how faith leaders develop compelling organizational brands as a response to competing ideologies and societal influences.

Religious epistemic authority and strategic arbitration

Existential philosophers of authority argue that the ultimate source of religious authority should be derived from a divine being who commands absolute

authority through its authorship of humankind, nature and the universe (Brummer 1981). However, such authority may be delegated to representatives such as Buddhist clergy by entrusting them with the charge to communicate divine revelations not ordinarily accessed by laypersons. Clergy's invocation power and knowledge enable them to act as a vehicle for individuals seeking enlightenment. A priest then assumes *de facto* epistemic authority when his/her followers believe that his/her knowledge, and therefore teachings, enable(s) them to access the divine. However, authority that is derived from knowledge or learning of sacred texts such as the Sutras is also a tenuous form of authority because knowledge carries with it a social dimension that can be acquired. Indeed, a principal argument of this paper relates to the changing informational context that has availed spiritual knowledge much more easily to laypersons. *De facto* epistemic authority is therefore also accompanied by *de jure* epistemic authority where rules, learning and practices are cultured and formalized in an organizational setting (Brummer 1981; Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo 1983). *De jure* epistemic authority offers the priest an official social standing from which to exercise authority by providing the normative basis for performatory authority including the authority to perform rituals.

By virtue of his/her epistemic authority, a priest does not have the right to command obedience since membership is largely voluntary and individuals are not compelled to accept such knowledge uncritically. However, if a priest is acting in accordance with the prescriptions of the organization, this increases his/her capacity to execute authority through institutionalization of the designated office. In this sense, the epistemic authority of clergy may be distinguished from that of a religious scholar because authority is vested in the organization, the aim of which is to establish roles and offices that facilitate the authorization of speech acts and actions.

Like other forms of authority, epistemic authority is relational and social: it operates through asymmetrical communication channels. Such authority is strengthened when the community trusts that clergy communicate teachings that are accurate and worthy of belief, and perform rituals that support *de jure* epistemic authority (Tyler 2006). In practice, Lincoln (1994) argues that religious authority should be treated as an aspect of discourse as it is a capacity to produce consequential pronouncements. Its performance not only involves but often depends on the appropriation of media. In an informational age, where knowledge is a principal object of transactions, Buddhist monks are confronted with competitive sources of learning, and it has become increasingly difficult to police or safeguard clergy's representation of Sutra doctrines.

However, a paradox of epistemic authority is that it is more effective when followers possess some level of knowledge that enables them to evaluate the legitimacy of clergy's knowledge (Wisse 2000). Our interviews below suggest that competing knowledge sources online can potentially increase confusion, but they also serve as a source of education. Teaching a bright and well-informed

student, for instance, can enhance a teacher's epistemic authority as the latter is able to move beyond communication modes of lecturing and dictating to that of mediating between texts. We term such expansion of communicative competency 'strategic arbitration', which includes skills of managing and reconstructing knowledge norms from competing sources online. This often involves having to go beyond traditions of learning that favour tutelage because the internet facilitates relational learning that includes peer and amateur production of knowledge.

Knowledge online is not necessarily authoritative but it may hold recognition for the viewer, particular among younger followers in Singapore for whom such knowledge is often regarded as *de facto* epistemic authority. However, as explained earlier, epistemic authority by nature is also tenuous and holds only to the extent that a group of followers accept its authority. Our interviews below suggest that rather force a debate of who is an authority in an informational age, Buddhist priests' response has been to act *in authority* through the construction of norms of credibility in navigating the world of web, blogs or social networking sites. This implies a strategy that maintains communicative influence through offline—online mediation that in turn restores trust and increases epistemic dependence. Strategic arbiters therefore attempt to re-circumscribe social networks online to sacred spaces and their specific practices, adopting a more reflexive approach to learning.

In sum, we suggest and show that Singapore's Buddhist leaders appears to be expanding their social identity from experts to arbiters of knowledge and encounters enacted within a continuum of old and new mediated spaces. Specifically, we identify three channels by which strategic arbitration is realized. First, priests dictate offline—online religious practices by rechanneling the broadcast processes afforded online to interpersonal priest and laity communication. Second, respatializing online—offline informational exchanges implies the prioritization of temple spaces and leaders' presence as a major medium of knowledge in ritual action. Lastly, priests are acutely cognizant of multimedia platforms. To act effectively as arbiters, they actively acquire multimodal communicative competency and build distinctive brands which in turn strengthens their reputation and credibility by allowing them to tell a consistent story. All these are expected to contribute to the relegitimization of epistemic authority but scarce research has examined the nature of strategic arbitration by Buddhist priests.

Methodology

This paper draws upon ethnographic interviews (Lindlof & Taylor 2002) as part of a multi-method study on religion and internet use covering Buddhist and Christian organizations,¹ specifically in-depth interviews with 20 Buddhist leaders (four of whom doubled up as their organization's webmaster) primarily

from the Mahayana and Theravada schools, with a few from other schools (mainly Vajrayana) (Table 1 describes the respondents' background via anonymous acronyms). The organizational membership ranged from 300 to 4,000, with two claiming membership/ mailing lists of almost 30,000. Leaders were quick to point out that the membership numbers did not accurately reflect the numbers of devotees who worshipped at their temples; most claimed that the latter was usually several times larger for regular events with the crowds swelling for special occasions. About half noted that their members were English-speaking professionals of Chinese ethnicity under 50 years old; of the rest, about half claimed a bilingual membership and the other half a primarily Chinese-speaking membership dominated by women 60 years and older. All the organizations we studied had a website (ranging from rudimentary to sophisticated); several also use computer-generated short message servicing (SMS) social networking programmes regularly to disseminate short texts and event updates to those on their mailing lists.

As there is no national directory of Buddhist organizations, a list was compiled from various directories (such as Singapore DharmaNet, Buddhahnet and Singapore Buddhist For You websites). This list of 329 temples and lay Buddhist organizations and associations formed the basis for our sample selection, supplemented by referrals from our interviewees. All but two of the leaders interviewed were male; two-thirds were senior monks, rinpoches² and key lay leaders. Interviews were conducted in English or Mandarin and lasted from one to two hours; the majority took place at temple grounds (three were in restaurants). The interviews covered internet use, Buddhism information dissemination and networks, authority and community building, ways that leaders work, and their organization's online resources and website management.

Completed interviews were transcribed in English (after translation, for those conducted in Mandarin), then followed by a detailed line-by-line analysis to generate initial categories as well as to suggest relationships among categories (Strauss & Corbin 1998). After initial data categorization, we returned to the data to confirm its usefulness (Charmez 2006) and developed categories associated with strategic arbitration. Triangulation of the observations and reiterative reviews of the categories by research team members contributed to the assurance of the quality and verification of the interpretations presented and the themes that emerged (Lindlof & Taylor 2002). This process, driven by our conceptual questions, also ensured that quotations selected to represent the viewpoints in the rest of the paper reflect convergence and consistency of opinions voiced by our interviewees.

The context: Buddhism in Singapore

As one of Asia's most wired and economically prosperous nations, Singapore presents a fertile context for the examination of mediated religion. Multi-religiosity

TABLE 1 Respondents' profile and context.

Reference	Position	Gender	Personal membership	Temple membership (estimated) ^a
BM02B	Abbot	M	Ordained in 2003 and joined temple in 2006	27,000 on mailing list
BM05B	Abbot (Senior Monk)	M	From Taiwan	Not available
BM06B	President and Lay Teacher	M	Given 'title of Buddhist clergy' in 1991	600 members, 3,000 on mailing list
BM07B	Abbot	M	Ordained in 1984 and joined temple in early 1990s	1,200 members
BM11A	Monk ^b	M	Joined temple in 1996	30,000 members, SMS list of 3,000
BM12B	Management Committee (MC)	F	On MC of monastery since 1991	30 members, attendance of >1,000, SMS list of 150
BM19A	Secretary of MC ^b	M	Temple official since 1995	300 members, attendance of 'a few thousand'
BM21A	Honorary President and Director ^b	M	President since 1995, grandson of temple's founder	Mailing list of about 1,500 'and growing'
BM23B	Abbot and Zen Master	M	With centre since its founding in 1991	'A few thousand members'
BT04B	President	F	Co-founded temple in 2000, President since 2006	2,000 members
BT08B	Assistant Monk	M	From Myanmar, ordained and came to Singapore in 2003	500 members
BT13A	Chief Monk	M	From Myanmar, came to Singapore in 2004	Not available
BT16B	Chief President and Monk	M	From Sri Lanka, came to Singapore in 1993	250 members

Continued

TABLE 1 Continued

<i>Reference</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Personal membership</i>	<i>Temple membership (estimated)^a</i>
BT17A	President ^b	M	Started teaching meditation at temple in 1992	500 members, attendance of 6,000
BT18A	Chief Religious Advisor and Lecturer	M	From Sri Lanka, came to Singapore in 1985, with this society since its inception in 1995	300 members, attendance of >1,000
BT20B	Spiritual Advisor	M	Originally from Australia, spiritual advisor to society since its founding in 1987	300 members
BO03B	Rinpoche	M	From Nepal, came to Singapore in 1981, temple abbot since 1997	'A few hundred members', attendance of >1,000
BO09B	President	M	With centre since its founding in 1988	SMS list of 500
BO10B	President	M	President 'since let's just say, the 1990s'	200 members, attendance of 800
BO15A	Spiritual Director and Lay Lama	M	Founded temple in 2001	Attendance of several thousand

Note: BM, Mahayana; BT, Theravada; BO, Others (mainly Vajrayana).

^aMost interviewees could/would not state a membership number and preferred to talk about attendance or mailing list numbers.

^bAlso, the organization's webmaster.

is part of Singapore's immigrant heritage and freedom of religion is constitutionally guaranteed (Tan 2008). With religious affiliation closely associated with ethnicity (Tong 2008), the government enacted the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act in 1990 (Tan 2008) to safeguard racial and religious stability among its population, approximately 74.2 per cent of whom are Chinese, 13.4 per cent Malay, 9.2 per cent Indian and the rest of other races (Singapore Department of Statistics 2010). Buddhism has remained the largest religious grouping over the last few decades; the last census found that 42.5 per cent of Singaporeans aged 15 years and older claimed to practise Buddhism, showing a strong increase in adherents from 1980 when 27.0 per cent claimed to be Buddhists (Singapore Department of Statistics 2001). Over this

time, almost all (99.6 per cent) Buddhists were Chinese (Singapore Department of Statistics 2001). While popular across age groups, Buddhism 'still had more adherents among those 55 years and older' (Tong 2008, p. 42).

Buddhism in Singapore is multi-faceted. The three main traditions practiced are Chinese Mahayana (the earliest form that arrived in colonial Singapore with Chinese and Indian immigrants), Theravada (based on a mix of Sinhalese, Thai, Vietnamese and Burmese origins) and Tibetan Vajrayana; more lately, the city-state has experienced transnational flows of Thai and Tibetan monks (Kitiarsa 2010). Scholars of Buddhism (e.g. Kuo & Quah 1988; Kuah-Pearce 2008) recognize that until recently, a majority of Singaporean Chinese Buddhists practised a form of Buddhism mixed with Taoism and Chinese folk beliefs; while religious modernization has meant that many are 'beginning to ... distinguish between Buddhism and syncretic Chinese religion' (p. 196), a sizeable number – mainly women and those aged 50 years and above – still practise 'Shenist–Taoist–Mahayana Buddhism' (p. 197). Kuah-Pearce (2008) contends, however, that since the appearance of Reformist Buddhists focusing on ideological purity and Buddhist teachings in the 1990s, Buddhism has become more popular among the younger and better-educated Chinese, including English-speaking members from the middle and upper-middle class.

Earlier studies suggest that while the easy availability of the internet has increased Singaporeans' use of religious sites online (Kuo *et al.* 2002), Buddhists in Singapore were less likely than Christians and Muslims to actively engage online for religious purposes (Kluver *et al.* 2008). This has probably changed for several reasons. First, there has been a rapid increase in Singaporeans' access to the internet, moving from 63 per cent in 2003 to 81 per cent in 2009 of households (Infocomm Development Authority of Singapore 2009). Second, since younger Singaporeans have high levels of online connectivity, the changing demographics of Buddhists posed by Kuah-Pearce suggests that there will be an increase in the levels of internet access by Buddhists. Third, Kluver and Cheong (2007) found that religious leaders of all faiths, including Buddhism, had noted the usefulness of the internet for learning about religion and would encourage its adoption. It is hence pertinent to research how Singapore's Buddhist leaders manage their communication among their folds.

Findings

Promotion of sacred compatibilities and chronemics

Tensions experienced by Buddhist leaders as they faced epistemic threats from online sources vary. While a few said that they have not observed many 'serious mistakes', most leaders acknowledged online threats as they have seen 'attacks on Buddha', 'wrong scriptural interpretations', 'shocking websites

of people impersonating as live Buddhas', sites linked to pornography, petty arguments in forums as well as sole reliance on online doctrines leading to 'extreme' views.

As suggested earlier, the stability of epistemic authority relations is dependent on organizational practices and community trust that facilitates norm inculcation through a liturgical order led by priestly acts and group religious observances. Within Buddhist organizations, this may take the form of Dharma classes. But in many cases where there may not be regular pulpit communication such as through the weekly mass in Christian organizations, and where sermon deliveries are tied to special dates in the Chinese zodiac calendar (e.g. *chu yi* and *chu wu*), the relegitimization of authority is rescaled to the context of interpersonal mentoring relationships.

Many leaders interviewed said that they actively encourage, even mandate face-to-face instructional contact, or a longer term disciple relationship with their temple devotees. While these priests acknowledge the online existence of various Buddhist resources, they caution about the dangers of learning about Buddhism from 'online downloads'. Instead, many reproduce a communication framework that steers, if not strengthens expectations of authorization by guiding followers to have regular connections with them. Several respondents said it was important for Buddhists to follow the 'middle way', to balance their intake of online with offline sources to avoid bad karma, lack of understanding and potentially dangerous practices:

But I definitely will not encourage them to just pray at home and read the book . . . you may not fully analyze and understand what it is talking about. You may read a book that was written some 20 or 50 years ago but if you come to a temple and listen to a talk, that's where we analyze it with a modern touch.

(BM07B)

You can't become a true Buddhist without having complementary Buddhist acts, with meditation . . . [it's] very dangerous to practice on your own and it's always good to have a teacher guiding you . . . You can get information and knowledge from the web but if you want to practice that [meditative] element, then you better go [to a teacher]. If you come up against psychological, emotional problems, the web is not going to help. You need to find a mentor.

(BM21A)

In particular, priests codify the significance of face-to-face learning by emphasizing verbal immediacy and interdependence. Several monks characterized their mentoring relationship as a 'strong link' and 'sacred meeting point between the teacher and the disciple'. Priests who stressed the necessity of a

deep interpersonal relationship with devotees also highlighted that historically much of the profound teachings of the Dharma has passed along 'direct transmission' and discipleship 'lineage' which reaffirm their relational history and privileged epistemic status, as one leader explained:

These [more common teachings] are available in the market, but the more uncommon teachings require the teacher to pass it personally to the student. As part of the Vajrayana tradition, you have to adhere to what we call the Samaya vow; that means you must take a vow so that when it's passed down, it's a teacher to student link. There is this karmic link that we believe is established. It's very personal and it's very sacred so it can't be just like ... I register, I write an email to you so you just send an email to me and practise and that's it. That's not how it works.

(BM19A)

Beyond the priest's regulatory role of when and how to pass on the teachings, one respondent also highlighted the importance of distinguishing between 'learning to be a Buddhist' – 学佛 (*xue fo*; 学 = learn; 佛 = Buddha) – by practicing what the Buddha has done before, and 佛学 (*fo xue*), the study of Buddhism, which is more amenable to some degree of independent learning via books and online sources (BM06B). Yet even the latter requires some degree of control. As another priest puts it, the need for scriptural tutoring is necessary so that 'proper' epistemological background to Buddhist teachings can be conveyed:

A lot of rules make sense only with respect to the goal. So if you have all the information out there without a teacher, and they start reading about this and that training rule ... Why is Buddhism asking me to give up sentient pleasure? ... Without the [broader] framework it doesn't make sense.

(BM02B)

As priests are relied upon to establish learning milestones through reiterative instructional sessions, this temporal management of mentoring relationships and shapes the chronemics of laity's learning since the attainment of enlightenment 'cannot be rushed'. One respondent said:

The good thing about having receiving the teaching from a master face-to-face is that you hear it from him, if you have doubts, on the spot you bring it up and you don't bring the doubts home. That is the most important thing. And the fact is that being a qualified master he knows how to regulate the teachings, how deep to go, what examples to quote so that you can receive it correctly.

(BM19A)

The above indicates that Buddhist strategic arbiters redefine laity's learning situation, shifting it from a more depersonalized version of the Dharma to relational structures that restore interpersonal exchanges. Moreover, an important difference between mere commands and strategic arbitration is the ability of clergy to tailor learning processes to serve laity needs by exercising discernment to regulate devotees' knowledge growth. In this way, leaders' counselling is embedded in diachronic relationships built upon members' piety and trust in their expertise which cannot be easily replaced by other sources overnight.

Priests' restructuring of authority is further evident in how they channel seekers' online questions back to 'physical touch'. Several monks explained how they viewed their online interactions as a portal to invite followers to meet them to receive scriptural guidance in specific issues:

Over email will be generic counseling. For example, 'Hey I've been sitting in generic contemplation and I've been distracted by noise, I have too many thoughts, what should I do?' Those are generic things. But if someone says, 'I've gone into very deep contemplation, I've become very blissful, relaxed. What do I do next?' Now, you have to explain the next steps face-to-face.

(BT17A)

Emails are important, but I still stress on personal touch . . . Younger people do send emails to talk about things and ask for my advice. Subsequently I would actually invite them to come and see me, sometimes even with their parents.

(BM07B)

These comments demonstrate how online questions may actually strengthen clergy epistemic authority when leaders dictate the chronemics in which these queries are clarified. As one respondent observed, priests' credibility is restored, and even increased, by recalibrating the balance between online and offline performances:

The answering clarifies all the doubts and actually brings more benefit to the person who raised the question and because of this, the respect to the Sangha members, to the monks and nuns, actually increases.

(BM12B)

While followers' online faith interactions thus beget a legitimization process that restores trust in religious order, re-legitimation is achieved not simply by justifying the validity of scriptural authority. Instead, in the context of some organizations, strategic arbitration allows clergy to realign epistemic authority

through appeals to followers' freedom to choose, inspired by informed interpretations provided by the priest:

Buddhist teachings cannot stop people from going into any websites from reading anything but they can educate people to be honest, have an enquiring mind and question how beneficial reading something or browsing a website is to one's life . . . You can't really tell the students, 'You got to accept this, this is our recognized value and this is what we think are Buddha's teachings' . . . Buddha said it doesn't matter what the source is. The important thing is you use this teaching in your life and then you'll find out if this teaching benefits you.

(BT04B)

We see the teachings as the final authority. We see the application of that teaching as the authority . . . [but] the most important step for Buddhists is to try out for themselves . . . As the Buddha says, whatever that is impermanent is suffering. You may accept it conceptually, or out of faith. If something happens to you, you may still suffer and not let go. So the key thing is to examine it for yourself.

(BM02B)

In this sense, discretionary power is retained that reinforces the priest's ability to dictate information and norms. In some instances, strategic arbitration involves warning laity of controversial information or censoring the free book distribution in temples by sources deemed unorthodox (e.g. literature disseminated by the Fa Lun Gong). Instead, they refer members to other sources including their own publications to reduce potential disputes over contradictory scriptural understandings. More than half of the priests interviewed have their sermons posted online as notes or available via webcasts, podcasts, videos or compact discs. Four priests also author blogs to 'dispel stereotypes about priests' and share their reflections on scripture. Therefore, new and old media are exploited and 'repackaged' to expand priests' epistemic influence in ways that appear to be credible to wired members.

Relocalization of sacred proxemics

Acquisition of ritual knowledge and competence can be gained online and is no longer dependent on direct interaction, yet internet use can facilitate the re-embedding of religious communities in temporal and spatial conditions (Krueger 2004). Reaffirmation of clergy authority via face-to-face focused group interaction is established (Collins 2004) when ritual order in Buddhist meditation is localized. Many interviewees said that while they are aware of 'rituals online' whereby ritual texts like meditation instructions are available

online (Helland 2005), their followers are imbued with the importance of corporeal mediation and chanting. Emphasis on physical gatherings elevates their pedagogical role since they can direct their followers' thought patterns and re-direct distractions:

You are able to really see the situation and work with the situation. We are quite near our neighbor and suddenly you hear a child scream . . . You can use the opportunity to say, 'Ah, those of you who are distracted by that, you know that your concentration is not there. Those of you who are not distracted by it, that's a sign that your concentration is well. Your focus is strong'.
(BT17A)

According to several monks, the stress on physicality or relocation of proxemics represents a distinct spiritual benefit as the 'atmosphere' (BM05B), 'energy' (BM06B) and 'vibes' (BO15A) from temple rites cannot be as easily or wholly replicated sensorially online. Indeed, the power of persuasion away from 'online rituals' accomplished in cyberspace (Helland 2005) rests on arbiters' commitment to the reproduction of meaning in sacred spaces or priestly physical presence. In the words of one respondent:

I think a sense of community and spirituality goes together and if a person practises by himself, it's difficult. You need to learn with each other, feel the energy, feel the warmth. For example if you chant the sutra by yourself . . . it's so different from you go to the hall with 50 people chanting at once.
(BM12B)

In this way, spatialized ritual discourse and temple interactions are understood as sacred under the domain of priests' leadership. Besides mediation, leaders also manage laity's need for sensorial rites which include the dispensation of blessings (*zhu fu*) by patting members' shoulders and blessing temple devotees who offer prayers, burn joss sticks and light prayer lamps (e.g. to seek good grades for their examinations). In Singapore, clergy also officiate ceremonies such as Vesak Day and the Mid-autumn Festival, where they lead mass prayers and offerings and where free vegetarian food is provided. Physical priestly presence is crucial to the success of these rites as event-based (re)production of memorable realities for members reinforces clergy's epistemic functionality in social capital building and institutional solidarity (Cheong & Poon 2008).

Acquisition of multimodal communication competencies

Within a highly mediated society, submission to priests' epistemic warrant is cultivated by aligning clergy status and ministry effectiveness to their mastery of web-based media. As a result, the organizational website and affiliated web

fora are viewed as important for priests to build a distinctive 'brand' (Twitchell 2007). For all interviewees, the website is prized as crucial to organizational development and growth, underscoring in part the processes of mediatization of religion (Hjarvard 2008) in Singapore. Several leaders said that their temples 'will not have credibility' if it is bereft of a strong web presence. Their responses underline the importance of virtual platforms to attract attention and reinforce legitimacy:

It's like a hygiene factor where everyone must have [a website] I think we've got to join the crowd because having a website . . . in terms of communication it'll be definitely better right? It's like having a soft copy notice board.

(BO10B)

[The website is used for the] dissemination of information, mp3s, course notes, the bookshop, retail . . . Also, the center profile, who we are. Almost everyday people will want to find out something about our organization, so without the internet, I think they will be very suspicious, you won't have much credibility. I don't think you can afford not to have a website.

(BO09B)

In response to competing voices and innovations in the spiritual marketplace, several leaders had spearheaded the creation and upgrading of their website to increase their appeal and web presence. Generally, little opposition to employing new media is voiced as the multimodal spread of Buddhist teaching is considered 'expedient' and a 'skilful means' of low- and high-tech evangelism. Pragmatic and integrated marketing campaigns, which are inspired by their temple's physical architecture, have been employed:

We took a page from advertising and marketing and we use what we call our corporate colors, maroon and white. And at the same time we took all the colors of the temple, the blue, the yellow, the orange, the red . . . so it [website] will be a virtual extension of the physical temple, but without a boundary.

(BO15A)

We make it a conscious effort to include the website address on all our advertising . . . We went through it two years ago, as we moved to the new building. We had a workshop and a brainstorming session, how we should better organize ourselves, and rebrand ourselves and have a more consistent corporate image We came up with a new logo, color scheme, the theme. The gold and maroon, the corporate colors, we

reflected that in the collaterals, newsletters, name-cards, brochures, the website was definitely a major platform.

(BT04B)

Notably, in line with research that indicates how Christian clergy of 'mega-churches' in America enhance their outreach via multimedia 'branding' (Twitchell 2007), some of our interviewees appear to exploit similar technologies to augment their prominence. By connecting to electronic branding activities, the scope of sensory bonds forged between leadership and laity is extended in new 'spaces of proximity' (Moor 2003) which generates affective interest and organizational loyalty. From this perspective, strategic narratives that weave temples' online and offline religious practices counter a sense of deterritorialization by offering a display and archive of authoritative performances online. This creates a sense of epistemic coherence among seekers and followers in a wired society.

As priests provide the 'vision' and 'vet' online content, organizational brand building is generally undertaken more rigorously in larger organizations with sufficient administrative support, financial resources and volunteers who can serve as web masters and forum moderators. Yet, control of online outreach is maintained under, not apart from, the leadership of the clergy who in some cases shape specific norms for computer-mediated communication by 'monitoring' online fora, setting up 'screening procedures' for uploads and establishing internet use rules. For example, one monk (BM11A) shared that he instituted 12 rules for online conduct (which include 'no discussion of politics, no rumours and no personal attacks') that are posted online and abided by all staff. Hence, by encouraging compliance to institutional rules on internet use, strategic arbitration is deployed to strengthen routine practices and allegiance to authority.

Conclusion

As epistemic resources are multiplied online, religious leaders develop stratagems that enable them to broker online and offline knowledge. Epistemic competency increases when followers perceive that priests are authoritative and trustworthy informants. In turn, the latter enables priests to utilize heuristic devices that are spiritually illuminating. Original primary data presented here augment this point. Many priests regard spiritual development as a learning (学 or *xue*) process. Learning involves cognitive, social and physical acts. All three acts, and in particular the latter (touching, chanting and meditation), are best realized under two spatial conditions. The first relates to the role of the teacher priest as the ultimate umpire and arbiter. This requires social proximity achieved through face-to-face interactions. Second, by operating within

temple grounds and invoking spiritual aura, ritual acts are sacralized, and laity is protected from non-ascetic experiences.

The above does not mean that Buddhist organizations are less wired compared with Protestant organizations (Cheong *et al.* in press). Many are highly wired, and our interviews were often interrupted as leaders answered cell phone calls or responded to texts on their Blackberries. The respondents indicate that web mastery is important for information dissemination, and they exploit multimodal communication. In a sense, strategic arbiters employ a multi-pronged strategy. The first centralizes epistemic resources by redirecting information and rituals online back to the priest. This relocation also favours an institutionalized structure, that is, *de jure* epistemic authority, for doctrine construction because priestly epistemic competence is privileged over other sources. Second, strategic arbiters authorize by co-opting followers through norm construction, branding and surveillance. Together with their representation of spiritual information online, the organizations invest heavily in the right to influence behaviour by increasing epistemic dependence.

The foregoing discussion indicates that new media developments affect religious authority relations through its pressures on the norm of credibility. This paper suggests that maintaining epistemic authority in the Buddhist context depends on a priest's ability to distribute epistemic resources that does not obstruct authority. Certainly, the priest cannot ignore competing information and rituals online; laity, however, are brought into clergy epistemic practice through direct interaction, in effect, allowing the priest to retain discretionary power that influences and dictates the norm of credibility. Clergy credibility is further restored and heightened when participatory performances led by the priest result in verifical effects, such as experiential energy flows among practitioners. Overall, our work suggests that Singapore Buddhist priests prioritize the maintenance of an institutional body of knowledge and practices. Potential epistemic dysfunctionality arising from online threats is minimized when clergy produce a bond of union through strategic arbitration.

Finally, moving beyond online observational data, we provided impressions of communicative practices from the religious leaders' perspective, but within the scope of this paper, in-depth sectarian comparisons are limited and generalization is not sought with this sample. Certainly, some clergy in each school of thought felt more encouraged or constrained to use new technologies than others. Future research could examine how priests' perceptions and practices intersect with broader organizational ties, and if applicable, their global affiliations. Given the salience of strategic arbitration, we anticipate research on more religious leaders, in different contexts to clarify the range of authority performances and how they may enable and constrain organizational growth. Moreover, in light of the scarce research in new media and Buddhism, it is recommended that additional studies fine-tune understandings of multimodal religious communication to broaden the meanings of faith beliefs and praxis.

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Notes

- 1 Analysis of the organizations' websites, participant observations and in-depth interviews with leaders and webmasters were conducted from mid-2007 to mid-2010.
- 2 An honorific used in Tibetan Buddhism to address a teacher who is thought to be reincarnated over several generations.

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