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Re-Imagining Morality on the Web

Abstract

Recent sociological studies suggest that many young people today lack a sense of socio-moral commitment and responsibility. Drawing insight from C. Wright Mills' *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), this research study asks: How do Catholic young adult websites contribute to the creation and performance of a storied identity that encourages the development of a sociological imagination, towards a sense of shared moral responsibility among young adults in an increasingly pluralistic age? This study explores at how religious organizations are using new media to communicate moral content to young adults and critiques the websites' conceptions of young adult development and morality in light of Kegan's (1982, 1994) constructive-developmental theory. Guided by Kegan's theory, the study explores how the websites function as a holding environment for young adult moral development by exploring how they provide confirmation, challenge, and continuity.

Introduction

The advances of social and cultural globalization raised new issues in the fields of morality and religious ethics. Online search engines provide almost unlimited access to information and remain the most popular way to access information on the internet, next to email.¹ The phrase "Google it" has, for many, replaced phrases like "look it up," or "research it."² The Internet and new media expose contemporary young adults to multiple points of view, competing truth claims, and diverse ways of knowing. The immense amount of information from one search can be overwhelming. In regards to this "information overload," Pijpers remarks that an overabundance of information "makes it very hard to distinguish crucial information from noise."³

The problem of information overload is not new. In fact, sociologist C. Wright Mills described this problem in the mid twentieth century. He pointed out that as people "feel they cannot cope with the larger worlds with which they are so suddenly confronted," they often disconnect from their social and historical surrounds,⁴ adding:

¹Kristen Purcell, Joanna Brenner, and Lee Rainie, "Search Engine Use 2012." *Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project* (Washington, D.C., March 9, 2012) <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2012/Search-Engine-Use-2012.aspx> (accessed Oct 5, 2014).

²Kristen Purcell et al., "How Teens Do Research in the Digital World," Nov 1. (Washington, D.C., 2012) <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2012/Student-Research> (accessed Aug 14, 2015).

³Guus Pijpers, *Information Overload: A System for Better Managing Everyday Data*, Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley and Sons, 2010.

⁴C. Wright. Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 4-5.

What they need, and what they feel they need, is a quality of mind that will help them use information and to develop reason in order to achieve lucid summations of what is going on in the world and of what may be happening within themselves.⁵

Mills calls this quality of mind *The Sociological Imagination*. He states the more information people are faced with, the more it “dominates their attention and overwhelms their capacity to assimilate it.”⁶ When people feel overwhelmed by society they often have a difficult time developing capacities for socio-moral commitment and responsibility. That is, they have difficulty understanding and making sense of the moral demands placed upon them within society. Developing a sociological imagination is, therefore, a necessary prerequisite for developing a sense of socio-moral responsibility.

Recent sociological studies suggest that many young people today lack a sense of sociological imagination and corresponding senses of socio-moral commitment and responsibility. Instead, they tend to reduce morality to personal choice or opinion. For instance, *The National Study of Youth and Religion* (NSYR) reported that sixty percent of the young adults interviewed in the United States feel that “morality is a personal choice, entirely a matter of individual decision.”⁷ Daloz, Keen, Keen, and Parks state that moral individualism gives rise to a sort of “cynicism” that leaves “little imagination of a collective will, of shared participation and belonging.”⁸ The world is viewed less often today in terms of universal concepts of right and wrong and more and more in terms of relative and ambiguous perceptions of morality. Overall, with the surplus of information available through new media, and a diminished capacity for sociological imagining, contemporary young adults may be losing a sense of a shared moral responsibility for the betterment of others and the world we inhabit.

Reliance on information technology has led many young adults to search online, often indiscriminately, for answers of general information, including religious and moral questions, over the internet.⁹ However, in striving to address contemporary young adults’ diminished capacities for sociological imagining and shared moral responsibility, religious educators and pastoral ministers can begin with the young adult practice of searching online for information. Specifically, Heidi Campbell explores how religious institutions and practitioners shape and *are* shaped by information technology and new media. In describing what she calls a “networked religion,” Campbell states¹⁰ “that religion online functions within a network of interactions, in which social relationships, structures, and patterns of belief become highly malleable, global, and interconnected.”¹¹ Campbell lists five characteristics of networked religion, including: “networked community, storied identity, shifting authority, convergent practice, and multisite reality.”¹² Hence, the development of new media provides religious educators with new

⁵ Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, 5.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Christian Smith et al., *Lost in Transition: the Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 21.

⁸ Laurent A. Daloz et al., *Common Fire: Leading Lives of Commitment in a Complex World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 12.

⁹ Purcell, “Search Engine Use 2012.” And Elana Larsen, “CyberFaith: How Americans Pursue Religion Online,” Pew Research Internet and Public Life (Washington, D.C. December 23, 2001).

¹⁰ Heidi A. Campbell, “Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline in a Networked Society,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 1 (March 2012): 65.

¹¹ Campbell, “Understanding the Relationship,” 67-68.

¹² Ibid., 68.

opportunities to explore young adult moral development beyond traditional physical environments and to consider how young adults construct and develop a moral identity online and, as Campbell states, “affirm an individual’s ability to use the internet as a tool to assemble religious identities.”¹³ This paper explores specifically the experience and development of a “storied identity” as it relates to moral development, and also describes the shifting nature of religious authority through the internet.

To understand how young adults can evolve the quality of mind needed for sociological imagining in a networked religion, this study explores Robert Kegan’s constructive-developmental theory of human personhood.¹⁴ Kegan’s theory provides a framework for religious educators to reexamine the role of new media to enable young adults to meet the mental and social demands of a sociological imagination and support a vision of maturity with openness beyond those demands. This study asks: How do Catholic young adult websites contribute to the creation and performance of a storied identity that encourages the development of a sociological imagination, towards a sense of shared moral responsibility among young adults in an increasingly pluralistic age?¹⁵

Kegan’s Constructive-Developmental Theory of Morality

Kegan’s constructive-developmental theory of human personhood and moral development provides a psychological framework for understanding how the sociological imagination can be nurtured in young adults. Mills suggests that the full realization of a *sociological imagination* requires a more complex “quality of mind”¹⁶ or, to use Kegan’s language “a qualitative change in the complexity of our minds.”¹⁷ According to Kegan, when we move beyond the Traditional/Socialized (third level) ways of knowing, towards the Modern/Self-Authoring, (fourth level) ways of knowing we are able to step outside the emotional connection to our relationships to see the broader context of meaning as we discover that we are our own authority, “guided by our own visions” and ideologies.¹⁸ As we grow in our ability to perceive the larger societal impact of our individual moral decisions, we begin to evolve the quality of mind needed for *sociological imagining*. As a result, our moral awareness comes from our own internal sense of integrity, or moral identity.¹⁹ Through extensive research and interviews, Kegan and his associates have reported that nearly one half to two-thirds of the adult population are still

¹³ Campbell, “Understanding the Relationship,” 73.

¹⁴ Kegan, *The Evolving Self* (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1994).

¹⁵ While social media pages; such as, Facebook and Twitter, are among the most commonly accessed media outlets by young adults, this study looks at how religious organizations are using new media to communicate moral content to young adults.

¹⁶ Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, 5.

¹⁷ Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1994), 6.

¹⁸ Kegan, *In Over Our Heads*, 172-173.

¹⁹ While this paper selects the two levels of knowing that relate most to the young adults years, it is important to note that, according to Kegan, society encourages and nurtures the further development of mental capacity beyond mid life (fourth level) by challenging people to grow beyond modern ways of knowing and to adapt to postmodern/Self-Transforming, or a fifth level of knowing. Websites can embrace a self-transforming, or dialectical vision of moral maturity by helping people develop the capacity to incorporate conflicting or alternative ways of knowing into our sense of self, showing us we are not autonomous and complete, but that we can and *want* to incorporate the moral sensibilities of the other into our sense of self (see Kegan, 1994, 322).

functioning at the Socialized, or third level of knowing, and *not* operating fully in the fourth, Self-Authoring way of knowing.²⁰

Developmentally, many young adults are struggling to carve out a new way of making sense of the world as they transition from adolescence towards third level knowing common to young adulthood and adulthood.²¹ The early young adult years (around age 18) often mark the beginning of a slow transition towards the third level of mental complexity, and few will evolve past the third order of consciousness before leaving college.²² The shifting nature of religion authority through the internet has further complicated the development towards self authorship and sociological imagining. Campbell states:

...the internet represents a sphere for the renegotiation and canonization of accepted sources of authority...It is recognized that the structure of web sites and discussion forums offers a platform of influence often not available to users offline, as they become interpreters of religious belief and culture online.²³

Kegan states the way our holding environments, or social surrounds, support our development will have an impact on our ability for more complex thinking, or sociological imagining.

Websites as “Holding Environments”

According to Kegan’s theory, we construct and build on our developing sense of self within the context of our relationship to our social environment, and the characteristics of our social environments, or “holding environments,” are important for healthy growth and development.²⁴ Campbell also states that in the networked religion, “religious identity is not simply absorbed through internet engagement...Identity is both constructed and performed, as internet users draw on multiple resources available online.”²⁵ With the increased use and reliance on new media, the internet has also become a type of holding environment where young adults construct and develop their moral identity both online and offline.

Kegan indicates three important functions of a holding environment: “It must hold on. It must let go. And it must stick around so that it can be reintegrated.”²⁶ Kegan describes these functions as *confirmation* (holding on), *contradiction* (letting go), and *continuity* (remaining in place). This section explores the conception of morality and moral development presented on the websites that were reviewed in terms of how they function as supportive, yet challenging environments in the ways they *confirm*, *contradict*, and *endure over time*.²⁷ The websites chosen for this study were selected by criterion sampling based on popularity, religious orientation, audience, and authorship or sponsorship. The criteria for website selection are that they be designed specifically for Catholic young adults and created or authored by an

²⁰ Kegan, *In Over Our Heads*, 191.

²¹ Kegan outlines five stages or “balances” we grow in and out of through out life. For the purposes of this paper, the stages that correspond most to young adulthood and the *Sociological Imagination* (levels three and four) will be described in more detail.

²² Kegan, *In Over Our Heads*, 37.

²³ Campbell, “Understanding the Relationship, 2012, 74.

²⁴ Kegan, *The Evolving Self*, 113.

²⁵ Campbell, “Understanding the Relationship,” 71.

²⁶ Kegan, *The Evolving Self*, 121.

²⁷ Ibid.

organization/person other than a diocese or parish. Of the several hundred thousand²⁸ websites referencing young adult morality found using “catholic young adult” on *Google.com* and that meet the selection criteria for how morality is presented to Catholic young adults, the top two that were selected for careful review are: *Bustedhalo.com* and *Catholicsoncall.com*.²⁹

Using Gadamer’s hermeneutic method³⁰ of textual interpretation, the information gathered from the selected websites on morality and the moral education of young adults is summarized, analyzed, and brought into dialogue with the researcher’s perspective. This section presents a horizon of inquiry for understanding by exploring how each website presupposes young adult’s think of morality and the type of moral reasoning the websites expect young adults to have.³¹ Next, this section explores how attuned the websites are to constructive developmental theory and examines their role as holding environments for young adult moral development and the construction and performance of a storied identity.

Confirming

From a religious educational and ministerial perspective, a positive holding environment *confirms* young adult development by trusting, acknowledging, and supporting where young adults are in the movement of life. For Kegan, *confirmation* supports young adults by showing them we take them seriously and recognize how *they* want to be seen.³² At this level of knowing we affirm and follow the moral truths established by a trusted authority outside of us. This section provides a brief description of each website, a survey of the moral content on the site, and examines how well each website acknowledges the collaborative nature of third order knowing. That is, this study asks: How does each site *confirm* the young adult need for inclusion, specifically the need to feel acknowledged and supported by the moral teaching of the Church?

Bustedhalo.com

Busted Halo® is described as an “Online magazine for spiritual seekers” sponsored by the Paulist Fathers. The director of the website, Fr. Dave Dwyer, CSP, writes “Busted Halo® Ministries helps young adults explore their spirituality, listen to and encourage one another, discover (or re-discover) the rich depths of Catholic tradition. . .” *Bustedhalo.com* “repackages”

²⁸ Google.com shows an estimate of 1,440,000 search results, however; by the nature of the Internet, this number changes weekly.

²⁹ While two websites are explored in this paper, a third website, *Youngadultholics-blog.com*, meets the research criteria. *Youngadultholics-blog.com* is self-titled as a “progressive” website affiliated with the group *Call to Action* (CTA 20/30), designed to support Catholic young adults in their 20s and 30s. The site brings in multiple perspectives on moral issues, often challenging the traditional moral teaching of the Church in light of contemporary experiences.

³⁰ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (2nd ed.). Translated by J. W. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004), 301.

³¹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 271. Gadamer states, when using the Hermeneutic Circle to interpret texts, “the important thing is to be aware of one’s own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one’s own fore-meanings” (271-272). In selecting articles and summarizing their content, the researcher was aware of the interpretation she brought to the text as she determined what is relevant to a research project on contemporary moral development. The content that is included and excluded in the summaries of each article reflect the researcher’s predisposition towards constructive-developmental theory and the transitional nature of contemporary young adult morality.

³² Kegan, *Evolving Self*, 194.

the Catholic faith using new marketing strategies to communicate the moral teachings of the Church, to more fully overcome the secularism, individualism, and relativism of society.³³

Busted Halo[®] confirms Catholic young adults in the third level of knowing by affirming the moral tradition of the Church. The posts and podcasts have a question and answer structure similar to the Baltimore Catechism. On the Busted Halo[®] radio show (prerecorded and turned into a podcast for the website) callers phone in with questions about church teaching and Dwyer provides answers on air.³⁴ In supporting young adults who base their moral decisions on the moral authority of the church, Busted Halo[®] helps young adults fully embrace third level knowing by addressing moral issues from the perspective of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, or the *National Directory for Catechesis*.

Catholics on Call

The Bernardin Center at Catholic Theological Union created the website *Catholics on Call: Direction for Your Life* as an online vocational outreach program for young adults. *Catholics on Call* has the specific purpose of helping young adults recognize a vocational call to service in the Church (from lay ministers to ordained clergy). Writers for the website begin with the premise that there are objective moral truths to be held, but the challenges of contemporary society have made these truths harder to identify and understand.

Catholics on Call confirms third order knowing by presenting the official position of the church on moral issues. Rather than challenging church teaching, the website provides alternative viewpoints to consider apart from the moral tradition of the Church. One post on sexuality³⁵ for example, provides information about the Church's stance on premarital sex. The author then follows up with examples of how many *young adults* perceive that teaching, and provides multiple perspectives on the topics raised. Overall, *Catholics on Call* provides confirmation by suggesting in many posts that young adults pray for discernment when faced with challenging moral issues and "reflect on God's call in their life."³⁶

Contradiction

Websites can provide *contraction* for young adult moral development by helping young adults raise questions about how they reason morally and begin to explore a sociological imagination. Developmentally, websites *contradict* or "let go" of the moral authority of the Church as ultimate and provide space for the development of the inner moral voice of those who use the sites. Mills states that the values we hold are "often unconsciously acquired habits rather than choices,"³⁷ and by providing *contradiction* we are helping young adults reflect and evaluate

³³ Dave Dwyer, "Young Adults and the New Evangelization," *National Leadership Forum on Young Adult Ministry*. (Orlando: National Catholic Young Adult Ministry Association, 2012).

³⁴ For example, one young adult called in and asked, "What does the Church say about transgendered people?"³⁴ The radio show responded with an answer from Church Tradition. On the radio show, the dialogue takes place between various members of the radio show, but there is no continued conversation between the members and the callers.

³⁵ Beth Knobbe, "Sexuality: Encouraging a healthy, holy love life," "Catholics On Call" entry posted August 27, 2007 <http://www.catholicsoncall.org/node/1037> (accessed March 10, 2015)

³⁶ "Catholics on Call: Direction for Your Life, "About Us" <http://www.catholicsoncall.org/about-us> (accessed March 15, 2015).

³⁷ Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, 194.

why they hold the morals they do. For example, do the sites ask young adults to make their own conscious decisions, to act on their moral reflections, or imagine and design their own moral solutions? Do the websites offer space and guidance for young adults to examine how they reason morally in terms of their experiences?³⁸ Holding environments provide contradiction, or “let go,” when they encourage moral maturity by “raising questions about the adequacy of confirmation.”³⁹ Websites that contradict challenge third order knowing by exploring the limits of moral authority through counterfactual moral reasoning and imagination; by seeing the “gap between person and world, things as they ‘might’ be and things as they ‘are.’”⁴⁰ Stated differently, providing *contradiction* helps young adults develop a sociological imagination.

Busted Halo[®] contradicts *second* order knowing, or preconventional morality, by helping adolescents see how their moral choices affect others, not just themselves.⁴¹ The questions posted on the site do not contradict the limits of third order knowing through analysis or evaluation, but ask, instead, for points of clarification and understanding. The site supports conventional morality by offering direct moral formation, but it does not raise fully questions about the limits of the moral tradition of the Church.

Catholics on Call provides contradiction by challenging third order knowing through reflections that explore the meaning behind the church’s moral position, rather than accepting it at face value, and blogs that engage in multiple perspectives.⁴² The reflections on the website “introduce[s] contradictory ideas”⁴³ and calls into question the adequacy of moral authority. The site provides the moral position of the Church, but raises questions about moral teachings and encourages young adults to think about their own moral voice; “a skill essential to the strengthening of formal reasoning”⁴⁴ and sociological imagining.

Continuity

Constructive developmental theory⁴⁵ states that as we develop and widen our perception to include more complex ways of knowing and embrace the sociological imagination, we transition through unsettling periods of relativism. We feel a sense of loss and anxiety when we begin questioning what we once held as true. As we shift how we construct our experience, we become vulnerable and often do not know where to turn. We rely less on the authority we once identified with, but have not yet formed a new way of making meaning.

³⁸ See Mills, 196.

³⁹ Laurent Daloz, *Effective Teaching and Mentoring* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1986) 193.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ When we let go of second order knowing, we no longer make moral choices based on our needs and wants, we become a part of something larger than ourselves, and feel “nourished in the private rituals and customs that enact and enforce the [community’s] deepest idiosyncratic beliefs of what life is really about.” (Kegan, *In Over Our Heads*, 267).

⁴² For example, an article by Robin Ryan on the Vatican’s statement against homosexuals in the priesthood, explores how challenging it may be for many to accept this instruction. He states, “Some will undoubtedly feel that it awakens painful memories of unjust discrimination. Others may argue that this teaching is opposed to the Catholic affirmation of the inherent dignity of persons with a homosexual affirmation.” See Robin Ryan, CP, “A Reflection on the Vatican Statement about Homosexuality and the Priesthood,” “Catholics on Call: Direction for Your Life,” entry posted April 17, 2007 (accessed March 12, 2015).

⁴³ Daloz, *Effective Teaching*, 213.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 224.

⁴⁵ Kegan, *The Evolving Self*.

Evaluating how effectively the websites reviewed “stick around” is challenging due to the nature of a website as a holding environment. People can “stick around” as young adults grow, transition, and struggle to reshape their relationships with them. How do websites accomplish this? This study suggests websites can provide *continuity* through the written dialogue on the sites. Websites can offer readers a place to comment (or call into a podcast) and reflect on the articles or blog posts, and authors or editors can follow up on questions or clarify information. These written dialogues were explored for the ways in which they provide “vision;”⁴⁶ that is, how they provide opportunities for self-reflection, and model a vision of moral maturity. This section explores how each site recognizes the transitional nature of young adult morality.⁴⁷

Both websites incorporate some sense of dialogue, either through online chats, callers phoning into a recorded podcast, or blogs with room to add reader’s comments. *Busted Halo.com* has a pre-recorded radio show where listeners can write or call in with questions about morality and church teaching. The answers are recorded through the podcasts, but there are no follow up questions on the show.⁴⁸ Eighty-seven percent of the posts do not provide *continuity* or space where “the old self and the new” can enter into dialogue through self-reflection.⁴⁹

Catholics on Call has a section for comments after every post; however, possibly due to low website popularity, there are no comments posted under any of the seven reflections on morality. There are five comments posted by readers throughout the whole site, thanking the author, or affirming an aspect of the blog the reader identifies with, but there are no follow up comments from anyone affiliated with *Catholics on Call*. In providing *continuity*, the website offers opportunities for young adults to share their reactions to the articles, but the site does not provide an effective forum for internal self reflection as there are no responses to the articles on morality.

Conclusion

The shifting and “malleable” nature of a networked religion⁵⁰ has created a new holding environment for young adult development. If religious organizations can frame their online presence as a holding environment that provides *confirmation*, *contradiction*, and *continuity* for young adult moral development, then a networked religion can enable young adults to reflect critically on how they understand morality in light of their changing experiences.⁵¹ New media can become a platform for religious educators and organizations by providing young adults with space to reflect on their own individual sense of morality and the interconnectedness between themselves and the larger society to transform the quality of mind needed to imagine creative

⁴⁶ Daloz, *Effective Teaching*, 213.

⁴⁷ Kegan *The Evolving Self*, 121, 129.

⁴⁸ Busted Halo® offers bog posts about the podcasts on its website; however, only two of the fifteen posts under *Morality and Social Teaching* provide space for posting comments on the corresponding podcast.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 230.

⁵⁰ Campbell, “Understanding the Relationship.”

⁵¹ By using new media as a repository for young adult moral formation, and failing to provide multiple perspectives on moral issues, websites like Busted Halo® do not encourage sociological imagining and may be discouraging young adults from establishing a shared sense of moral responsibility. *Catholics on Call* offers a vision of moral maturity beyond third level knowing, but it is ranked ninth out of the top ten websites for Catholic young adults.

solutions to private and public issues of morality towards a shared sense of moral responsibility in the world.

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