

The Use of the Qualitative Approach and Digital Ethnography in the Study of Religion and New Media: Reflections from Research Fieldwork in Botswana

Gabriel Faimau* and Camden Behrens[§]

Abstract

The existing literature on religion and new media often focuses on the interdisciplinary nature and perspectives in this research field. While this emphasis is relevant, the analysis of practical strategies developed by researchers prior to and during the research fieldwork is commonly neglected. As such, practical questions, methodological issues and the ethical concerns encountered by researchers are often overlooked. Drawing from our field notes and fieldwork experiences during a study conducted from 2016 to 2017 in Botswana, this paper reflects on the process of using a qualitative approach and digital ethnography in the study of religion and new media. By examining the ethical and methodological issues encountered during the fieldwork, we advance two related arguments. First, while interpersonal and communication skills are necessary for the success of fieldwork, researchers of religion and new media also require practical skills to deal with the complexity and ambiguity of issues around access to research sites and ethics throughout the research process. Second, scholarly investigation on the manifestation of religion in the new media should not only focus on the circulation of narratives by religious institutions on their new media outlets; but also on the dynamics of personal stories shared within a religious community and the impact of these stories on individuals and religious institutions when they are widely circulated online.

Introduction

Research practice within the tradition of the qualitative approach, often involves fieldwork whereby a researcher attempts to understand and discover the underlying meanings behind human behaviours and actions. Here the researcher can enter into a research setting, gather data, make sense of various social events and encounters, and organise the collected information in such a way that new knowledge of the phenomenon under study is produced. Although reflexive descriptions of fieldwork experiences by qualitative researchers have been well-documented (Bradley 1993; Day 2012 and Gallagher 2008), reflections on fieldwork in the area of religion and new media in the African context have been under-represented. While digital methodologies have been developed specifically to study digital religion or online practices of religion (Tsuria *et al.* 2017), in the African context there is a lack of methodological approaches for understanding the extent to which common religious beliefs and practices are extended to an online sphere; and the ethical issues and dilemmas associated with such religious extension online. As such, complex research settings, practical methodological issues and ethical questions encountered by researchers are often overlooked.

From 2016 to 2017, we conducted a study focusing on new media and prophetic ministries in Botswana to address the following research questions. First, in what ways are religious manifestations and beliefs of prophetic ministries in Botswana extended to an online sphere through various new media platforms? Second, to what extent do new media platforms shape and re-shape the religious practices of prophetic ministries in Botswana? Drawing on our field notes and experience from the research fieldwork, we reflect on the process and experience of using a qualitative approach and digital ethnography. As new

* Gabriel Faimau, Department of Sociology, University of Botswana. Email: faimaug@ub.ac.bw

[§] Camden Behrens, Department of Sociology, University of Botswana. Email: camdenjb@gmail.com

media and religion is a relatively new research field in Botswana, our reflections will also examine ethical and methodological issues encountered during the fieldwork. These include the complexity of gaining access, the etic and emic perspectives, questions surrounding the existing statistics, and ethical issues.

Religion and New Media

Research on the intersection between religion and new media has been a growing field over the past two decades. Within this field, scholars have addressed questions regarding the intersectionality of religious engagement, new media technology and digital culture, and in particular, the ways in which new media technology informs and influences religious engagement and enables religious groups to practice and preach their religious beliefs to a broader audience (Campbell 2012, 2013, 2016 and 2017; Cheung 2016; Wagner 2012). Digital religion has emerged as a field of study with its own interdisciplinary enquiry. Campbell (2017) mapped the rise of digital religion studies and identifies four waves of theoretical approaches in the evolution of this field. The first wave, which began in the late 1990s, is characterised as a descriptive era where scholars focused on describing what was happening to religious discourses and practices on the Internet. The second wave emerged in the early 2000s when scholars attempted to categorise typologies of religious Internet practice. For example, Helland's categorisation of 'religion-online' refers to how traditional forms of religious practices are made available online and 'online-religion' relates to how religion is adapted for the Internet in order to create new forms of networked spirituality (Helland 2000 and 2002). The third wave involved a 'theoretical turn'; scholars paid more attention to methods and frameworks in the analysis of various strategies utilised by offline religious communities in adapting new media outlets for their use. The latest, and fourth wave, focuses on how religious actors negotiate between the online sphere and the offline setting.

While this is an open research field, studies on religion and new media in Botswana have been relatively neglected when compared to other countries on the continent, such as South Africa, Ghana and Nigeria (Hackett 1998 and 2006; Ukah 2008). Haron (2010) made a general observation on the positions and relationships between religion and media in Southern Africa, including Botswana, and noted that some religious groups in Southern Africa had already begun to extend their presence into the Internet space. A study by Togarasei (2012) was the first study that focused on religion and new media in Botswana. In his study, Togarasei (2012) interrogated the extent to which Pentecostal charismatic churches in Botswana and Zimbabwe had adopted and appropriated the use of new media technologies such as radio, television, the Internet, e-mail, mobile phones, and various print media in their worship. Our study, 'New Media and Prophetic Ministries in Botswana'², was a response to the limited scholarly research in the area of religion and new media in Botswana. It examined the multifaceted characteristics of prophetic ministries and how new media shapes religious discourses in Botswana. The study employed a mixed methods approach with a case study design to interrogate 'cases of paradigmatic diversity' (Sarantakos 2013:53). As the research was designed as a case study, the fieldwork employed a site-methodology through the use of multiple data collection methods, such as participant observation, self-administered survey questionnaires, narrative interviews and digital ethnography.

Participant observation is used by researchers to study and observe a group from the inside. Through the use of participant observation, researchers study the structure of the group, tradition, attitudes and problems as experienced by the members of the group (Sarantakos 2013). This method was used in our study to understand 'the culture' of selected prophetic ministries. During the fieldwork, the researchers observed various religious activities and events organised by these ministries. To facilitate the observation process, a guide focusing on the setting and structure of the religious activities was developed. Additionally,

²This study was funded by the Nagel Institute with generous support from the John Templeton Foundation in the United States of America.

the sermons and religious testimonies were recorded as well as some of the special events that occurred during the period of participatory observation such as reactions to prophecy, healing and deliverance events that took place during a service. The observation was conducted through attending between two and four church services for each of the selected prophetic ministries.

Data was also collected through the use of self-administered questionnaires. The questionnaire had four sections with 93 questions to gather data on bio-data and demographic profile; church affiliation and religious identity; media, communication and religious activities; and culture and religious beliefs. The questionnaire was administered randomly to members of the selected prophetic ministries when the church services were being observed. 661 research participants completed and returned the questionnaires. Narrative interviews built upon the data collected from the survey questionnaires. The narrative interview was used because it is both an interview and an autobiographic method of data collection. According to Sarantakos (2013:289-290), the narrative interview is 'a form of communication with people, and in this sense communication refers to everyday life situations and experiences'. As an autobiographic method of data collection, the use of narrative interviews allowed participants to talk freely about their personal lives and their experiences as a member of a prophetic ministry. The selection of research interviewees focused on two groups, namely key informants such as prophets or religious leaders and regular members of the selected prophetic ministries.

As this study focused on religion and new media, we also used digital ethnography to collect data. Scholars argue that 'ethnography is about telling social stories' (Murthy 2008:838). Ethnography has many characteristics but observation and participation are central to ethnographic studies. Using digital ethnography as a methodological approach, we developed new understandings of 'observation' and 'participation' as we engaged in digital fieldwork (Markham 2013). Our observations included archiving reviews, posts and comments placed on the new media outlets of the prophetic ministries under study, such as Facebook pages, YouTube Channels, blogs and websites. We treated these new media outlets as sources of data and tools for affirming institutional identity. Moreover, as suggested by Karaflogka (2006:180), new media outlets of prophetic ministries have the potential to illustrate 'what the leader(s) think, on the one hand, the essential message of the page should be and, on the other hand, the best possible ways to present it'. Digital participation encompasses engaging and closely following all posts and comments made on new media outlets. This includes noting the ways in which: new media outlets provide venues for religious events; and how new media users engage in religious events through various posts and comments placed on the prophet ministries' official new media outlets.

Complexities Surrounding Gaining Access

Access to the research site and research participants, navigating through the gatekeepers of the research sites, and the relationship between a researcher and a target research site as well as participants are crucial in any research design. When we designed our study, gaining access to the potential research sites presented a problem. As researchers, we were outsiders who were not members of the prophetic ministries in Botswana. Before the issue of gaining access was addressed, we decided to formulate a list of the prophetic ministries that could be potential research sites. To facilitate the process, we employed a mapping technique using the list of registered prophetic ministries in Botswana as a guide. This list was obtained from the Department of Civil and National Registration in Botswana. The mapping process was informed by the following criteria: prophetic ministries that were led by a Motswana prophet; and prophetic ministries that had websites, Facebook pages, YouTube channels or Twitter accounts. One of the objectives of the study was to examine the extent to which culture is translated into religion in the Botswana context. The first criterion was included on the assumption that a Motswana prophet would

be relatively familiar with Tswana culture. From the list that was generated, we selected eight prophetic ministries based in Gaborone city and its surroundings, Francistown city and Maun for the study.

Access to the identified prophetic ministries required the use of both informal and formal approaches. The informal approach included contacting some members of the selected prophetic ministries who were known to the researchers. These members provided advice on the internal practices of each prophetic ministry, and on how to approach them when inquiring about their inclusion in academic research. A direct visit to some of the selected prophetic ministries was also used to gain access to the research sites and participants. The direct visit allowed the researchers to identify the key contacts that could facilitate the process of involving a prophetic ministry in the study.

The formal approach involved submitting formal request letters addressed to the prophets of the seven prophetic ministries. The letters described the project, its aim and objectives and explained why a particular prophetic ministry was selected for the study. Research instruments such as the survey questionnaire and interview schedule were attached to the letters. The letters included the email address and phone number of the principal investigator (PI) (the lead author in this article) and were either hand-delivered to the ministries by the PI or delivered by a member of the ministry who was known to the researchers. Rather than responding by letter, all the selected prophetic ministries responded by telephoning or sending a short text message to the PI. However, the telephone calls were not made by the prophets themselves but by either the prophet's Personal Assistant (PA) or a member of the management team.

While the above strategy was successful for gaining access to the research sites, it revealed an important aspect about the presence and role of gatekeepers in a research site as well as the existence of multiple layers of gatekeeping. In the context of our research, a prophet's PA and members of a prophetic ministry's management team played the role of gatekeepers in the first instance. As gatekeepers, they determined the availability of the prophet and the possibility of meeting him. This was achieved by applying prophetic language in their responses to our request. When the PI gave the request letter to a member of the management team, he/she indicated that the prophet would pray over the letter before making a decision to grant access for the research. When the PI asked whether a meeting with the prophet was possible, the management team responded by saying that 'The prophet will pray over your request. He has to listen to the Holy Spirit. If the Holy Spirit says that it is okay for the prophet to meet you, the prophet will tell me. I will immediately inform you thereafter'.

As already indicated, all our formal request letters were responded to through telephone calls or short text messages to say that we had been given access. The way our requests were presented to the prophets remains unknown as follow-up interviews with PAs and members of the management teams we encountered were not carried out. Nevertheless, the strategy was relatively effective as the researchers were welcomed into the selected prophetic ministries. This welcome revealed a hierarchy of gatekeepers. While the assistants acted as gatekeepers to access the prophet, the prophet was the gatekeeper of knowledge from the congregants. In three of the seven prophetic ministries, the prophets personally informed the congregants about the study. One of the prophets said that 'a number of University of Botswana students with their lecturer are among us in our service today. They are conducting a study on our church. We need to support them with relevant information that they may need'.

Access to the research site also meant access to information. The prophet appeared to have the final say with regards to giving information about his prophetic ministry and its affairs to outsiders. The words of one of the bishops in one of the ministries highlighted this point:

We cannot speak about our ministry to other people, to strangers, but the prophet has announced in the church. That means that you are now one of us because you have been welcomed and

introduced in the church. You can now ask me questions. Feel free to get information from other church members. Daddy [the prophet] has allowed them to share with you.

However, gaining access to information from potential participants did not necessarily mean gaining access to the prophet. Of the selected prophetic ministries, we were only granted an interview with three prophets.

Within scholarly studies, gaining access to the research field and research participants is often one of the many problems researchers encounter, particularly for in-depth qualitative research. While communication and interaction between the researcher and multiple parties in the research process is necessary, access to research fields and participants ‘requires regular negotiation and renegotiation at different stages and with different members of the enterprise’ (Okumus *et al.* 2007:23) and ‘involves some combination of strategic planning, hard work, and dumb luck’ (Van Maanen and Kolb 1985:11). Our experience demonstrates that gaining access is not a straightforward process; it involves negotiation with a hierarchy of gatekeepers of research sites. Previous studies have demonstrated that gatekeeper approval for access does not necessarily mean that co-operation is guaranteed (Oates and Riaz 2016; Shaffir *et al.* 1991). Our experience was somewhat different. Given that prophets of prophetic ministries have the ultimate power over the affairs of their ministries, gaining access to the research site also meant gaining access to the required information for the study.

Perspectives of Emic and Etic in Research

At around 10 am on a Saturday in July 2016, the PI arrived at a prophetic ministry after securing an appointment to meet and conduct an interview with the prophet there. The PI was welcomed by a bishop of the ministry and taken to a two-roomed mobile home located about 200 meters from the main church. The bishop played the role of first gatekeeper. The young bishop said that ‘the prophet is now providing consultation, but I will approach him to find out if you could [sic] see him. You will wait for me outside when I get in’. After waiting for about ten minutes, the bishop came out and informed the PI that ‘daddy’ and ‘mami’ were ready to see him. (The use of family lines or parental relationships when addressing a prophet and a prophet’s wife is common among prophetic ministries in Botswana. As such, prophets are intimately called ‘father, ‘daddy’ or ‘dad’ and a prophet’s wife is called ‘mom’ or ‘mami’. For further exploration on the authority of a prophet and a prophet’s wife in relational terms, see Faimau and Behrens (2016).)

The room where the prophet and his wife provided counselling was relatively small (about 16m²) given his popularity in the area as well as in the country. The prophet sat next to a table while his wife sat next to him. In this encounter, the prophet did not initially address the researcher. ‘Tell us who you are and what brings you here’, the prophet’s wife opened the conversation, acting in the role as the second level gatekeeper. The PI introduced himself and explained the details of the research project as well as the purpose of having an interview with the prophet. She continued by saying that ‘Many people from your campus come to “daddy” asking for advice. They also come to our church. What are you planning to do with the information you will get from us?’ The PI explained that the information would be used only for academic purposes. ‘Are you a Christian?’ she continued. While confirming his personal beliefs, the PI underlined his position as a researcher.

She concluded by saying that ‘Before you came here, “daddy” already saw you. He knew who you are [sic]. Now that you are here, he is also your “daddy”. You are now free to talk to “daddy”.’

The introductory process with the prophet’s wife, took about fifteen minutes and then the conversation with the prophet took place. In this instance, the prophet’s wife took the lead until the prophet felt he knew enough to grant the researcher access to him. The conversation with the prophet had progressed for about

twenty minutes when his wife interrupted: ‘Today is women’s conference day and they have been waiting for “daddy” in the church. If you are free, we can continue the conversation tonight after the conference’. The PI agreed with the proposal. The conversation with the prophet took place after the event and lasted for about three hours.

The following day, the PI joined the ministry’s Sunday service. At the beginning of his sermon, the prophet introduced the PI and his research assistants, as well as other dignitaries who were visiting the church that day, to the congregants. The prophet also asked the congregants to provide any information that the PI and the research assistants might need. The above account indicates the multi-layered nature of gatekeeping encountered in our research sites. This included going through the bishop, the prophet’s wife and the prophet himself. Negotiation with gatekeepers brings to the fore the issue of ‘outsider’ and ‘insider’. As such, throughout the negotiation, the researcher has to navigate his/her positionality from an outsider to the realm of an insider. The dynamic of being an ‘outsider’ and an ‘insider’ has always been a challenge for researchers who engage in ethnographic studies or collect data using an in-depth interview approach. This dynamic may be more complex in the research area of culture and religion as described in the above account. As an outsider, the PI was first examined before he was welcomed as an ‘insider’.

Pike (1971) introduced the terms ‘emic’ and ‘etic’ for studying behaviour from inside a system or outside a particular system. According to Pike ‘It proves convenient –though partially arbitrary –to describe behavior from two different standpoints, which lead to results which shade into one another. The etic viewpoint studies behavior from outside a particular system and as an essential initial approach to an alien system. The emic viewpoint results from studying behavior as from inside the system’ (Pike 1971:37). The balance between emic and etic viewpoints is often expected from researchers as this allows them to develop a broad and full understanding of the system under study. Morris *et al.* (1999), for example, argued that emic and etic insights are in fact complementary because emic research can reveal the novel constructs within a particular system on its own terms while etic research provides a geographical map of key principles of the system under study through the lens of prior theories that inform the geographical mapping process. The emic and etic viewpoints ‘draw researchers’ attention to different components of justice judgments, making it more likely that all of the important aspects of cognition will be recognized’ (Morris *et al.* 1999:791). Rosa and Orey (2012: 865) also underlined the dialectical nature of both viewpoints; they argued that emic knowledge is crucial and essential to the intuitive and emphatic understanding of the cultural practices developed by a particular group.

‘[W]hile etic knowledge is essential for comparing these practices... In this sense, emic knowledge is a valuable source of inspiration for the development of etic hypotheses’ (Rosa and Orey 2012:865). As neither of the two authors was a member or follower of the selected prophetic ministries we were outsiders when we negotiated for access to the research sites. In our approach, we subscribed to the integrative emic and etic viewpoints described above. This means that we acknowledged our ‘outsiderness’ (Landford 2018) but, at the same time, we were open to the culture of the research site throughout the research process. By being open and taking an emic role, we aimed to understand the various religious practices within the selected prophetic ministries in the same way as their members understood them.

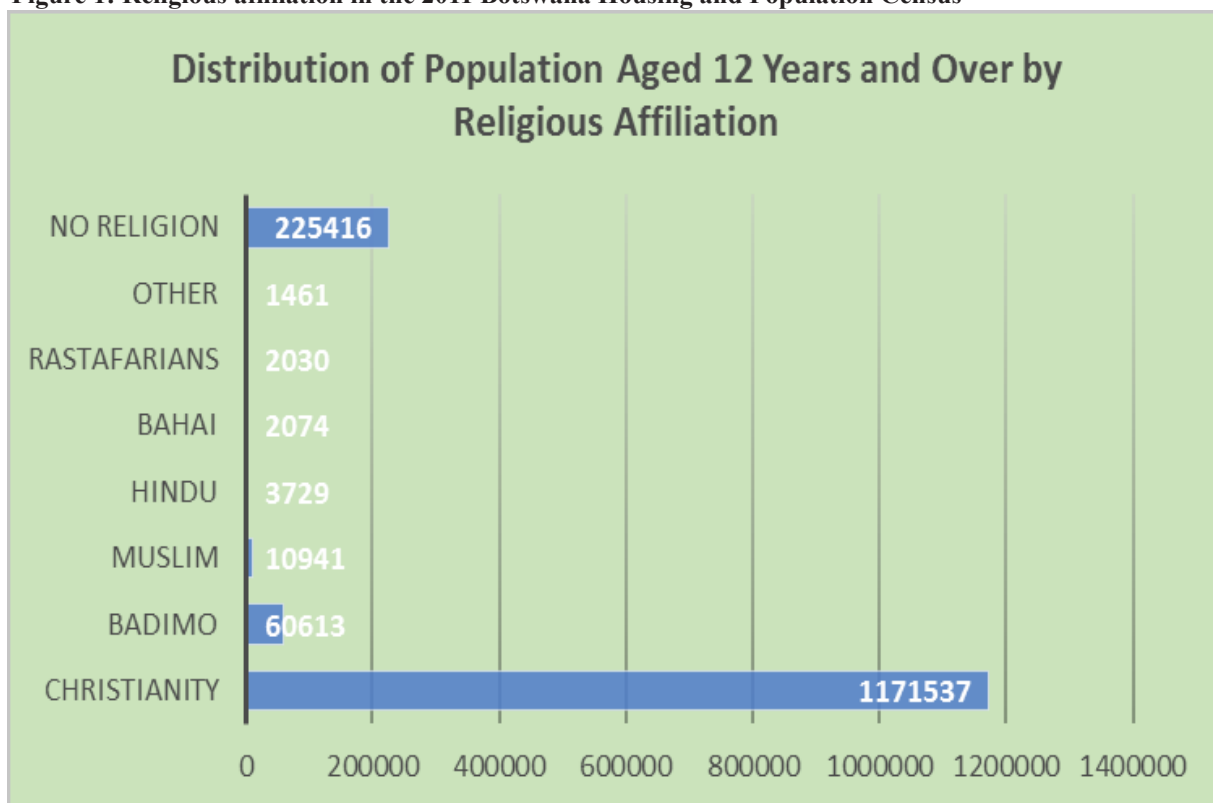
In this context, bias often becomes an issue. In response to this potential challenge, we developed a mixed-methods study design that provided us with a relatively integrative understanding of the religious practices and the use of new media among these prophetic ministries. In addition to the research design, we also organised a consultative workshop on 28 November 2016 where the preliminary results of the study were presented. Representatives from the selected prophetic ministries and experts in the field of religion and media were present at the workshop. The workshop allowed us to incorporate emic level insights through the comments and responses from representatives of the ministries and etic insights from experts

in the field. These insights provided us with new perspectives on navigating through the dynamics of being ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ social researchers.

Behind the Statistical Data

As part of our effort to negotiate between being an outsider and an insider, we used a mixed methods study design where in-depth interviews offered us a reflexive emic positionality through which we could reflect on the religious practices of members of the prophetic ministries. To control our emic positionality, we adopted a survey questionnaire as a method of data collection. One of the challenges we faced in designing the survey questionnaire was to develop a question on religious affiliation that reflects the reality of Botswana’s religious landscape. Religion is often included as a variable in many surveys conducted in Botswana. In the 2011 Housing and Population Census individuals were asked: ‘What is your religion?’ Figure 1 below was recorded in the census as responses to the religious affiliation variable:

Figure 1: Religious affiliation in the 2011 Botswana Housing and Population Census



Source: Statistics Botswana (2015)

Responses to the religious affiliation variable, as indicated in the above table, show that 79.3% of the participants (1,171,537 people) were affiliated with Christianity while about 15.3% (225,416 people) had no religion. Although the 2011 census provided a macro understanding of religious affiliation in Botswana, a critical issue that was not revealed was affiliation to the various Christian denominations. Statistical reports from Statistics Botswana (2015) and Amanze’s (1994 and 1998) fieldwork data on the demographics of Christianity and its associated denominations offer insights into religious demographics including the demographics of Christianity in Botswana. In our view, the existing data does not clearly reflect the dynamics of Botswana’s religious landscape as it does not consider how respondents understand

the idea of religious affiliation. For example, one would ask, in what way is the idea of affiliation with a certain religion or denomination translated at a practical level? Indeed, the inclusion of a variable on 'religion' has been a point of debate. Haron (2017) acknowledged this when he surveyed a brief history of the 'Religion' variable in Botswana censuses. According to Haron religion 'only surfaced as a key variable in the 1991 Botswana Population and Housing census. The statistics were not made available and no reason was given as to why this was the case. Nevertheless, it was only after the Botswana Population and Housing Census 2001 survey... was undertaken that insightful religious demographics were revealed (Haron 2017: 97-98). It could be argued that the inclusion of 'Religion' as a variable and the availability of religious demographics is, at best, a public acknowledgement of the influential role of religion in the society.

This methodological challenge was taken into account when we designed the survey questionnaire. We were of the view that a single question on religious affiliation would not clearly reflect the actual religious affiliation of research participants. We, therefore, decided to revise the traditional question of 'which church do you belong to?' and formulated three related questions whose aim was to understand the dynamics of religious belonging among our research participants. The three questions were: 'What is your current church/ministry?' 'Which church/ministry would you say you belong to?' and 'Which church/ministry did you last attend?' The decision to develop three related questions on religious affiliation proved to be fruitful.

The survey results revealed that 3.34% (n = 661) of participants indicated that they belonged to one church while going to or participating in other prophetic ministries; 11.76% stated that the church they last attended was a church other than their current church/ministry. Moreover, in relation to family events, 37.65% of the participants claimed that they consulted and asked for blessings from pastors or prophets from other churches or ministries (Faimau 2018). These results demonstrated that the inclusion of multiple questions helped to interrogate issues around religious belonging and religious practice. From the data, it was evident that an affiliation with a certain denomination was not a fixed phenomenon as one might be affiliated with a certain Christian denomination while, at the same time, be a regular visitor, 'consumer' or 'customer' of other denominations.

As we reflect on the methodological issues in our fieldwork, two arguments can be proposed: first, the emic and etic question when researching religion does not only involve strategies of positionality negotiation on the part of the researcher. It also involves a practical strategy for designing a study and the use of different data collection methods. Second, the production of research results that reflect the realities on the ground requires creativity in the design of a valid research tool. This includes interrogating traditional demographic profile questions that are commonly used in survey tools. Finding different ways for constructing questions in a survey may result in study results that provide for interpretations beyond descriptive statistics.

Questions Around Research Ethics

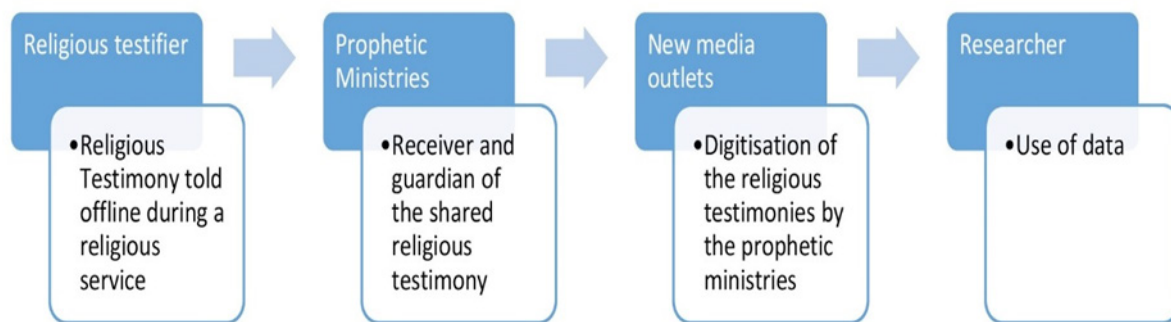
Questions around ethical considerations are arguably the most challenging issue in the study of religion, religious practices and religious data within the digital space. The following case from our study illustrates this point:

One Sunday in 2017, a young lady gave a testimony in one of the selected prophetic ministries. She said that from her early childhood she had been a tomboy. As she grew into young adulthood, she began to develop romantic feelings towards other young women. Now as a young woman, she found herself among a group of lesbians. Within this group, one had shown a romantic interest in her and she had been considering responding positively to engaging in a relationship. Things

changed when she came in direct contact with God through the prophecy given by the prophet of the prophetic ministry. The prophecy revealed her true identity and her love life had been liberated by God.

On the same day that the testimony was shared in the church, an online post narrating the testimony appeared on the church’s official Facebook page with an eye-catching title: ‘Rescued at [sic] the brink of lesbianism’. The posted testimony mentioned the name of the young lady and was accompanied by a picture of her in the midst of the church’s congregants. The above account highlights the fact that testimonies are normally told offline to the congregants during a church service before they are circulated online. Our use of data from the prophetic ministries’ new media outlets can, therefore, be described in Figure 2 below:

Figure 2: The Digitisation Process of Religious Testimonies



The production of online data has two phases. The story was first generated through an event of testimonial narratives or religious testimony that took place offline during a church service. The prophetic ministries and offline church service congregants can, therefore, be described as the first receivers of the testimonies. In the second phase, religious testimonies were circulated online through various new media outlets, such as Facebook pages or YouTube channels in the hope that the testimonies would reach a broad online audience. Although religious testimonies normally have a happy ending, the impact of the online circulation of one’s dark past accompanied by the circulation of pictures or testimony videos online cannot be underestimated. As such, the online circulation of posts and testimonies and their usage for research purposes raised a number of questions and issues around research ethics. To whom does a religious testimony belong? How is the wellbeing of a religious testifier protected when his or her story is circulated online in the name of religious belief? How do we draw an ethical line when we use publicly available data without the direct knowledge of the religious testifier? In what contexts could consent for using a personal story that is publicly circulated be required?

The above questions are open to further research. One could suggest that each institution, including religious institutions, sets its own ethical boundaries and operates within its normative frameworks and ‘localised ethics’ (Henderson *et al.* 2013). However, as new media platforms have generally been accepted as public spaces, issues relating to the online presence of any activity, including religious activities, are subject to public scrutiny. Ward and Wasserman (2010:275) suggested that with the emergence of new media technologies, what was generally known as closed professional ethics has become ‘an open media ethics’ or ‘an ethics that is the concern for all citizens’.

The ethical complexity of using available data within a digital sphere has been a subject of discussion

among researchers. At the heart of this complexity is the burning question of whether online data should be considered as data from human subjects with ethical implications relating to consent, privacy and confidentiality or simply as open texts available for public consumption (Henderson *et al.* 2013:547). As summarised by Rosenberg (2010), Henderson *et al.* (2013) and Barnes *et al.* (2015), the debate has divided scholars into two schools of thought. In the first group, scholars have argued that new media platforms are public platforms and, therefore, the materials available on them are public. Consequently, consent is viewed as unnecessary. In the second group, scholars have placed emphasis on the benefit and protection of research participants and argue that priority should be given to the intention of research participants because materials available on new media platforms may not be intended for a public audience or consumption. As Zimmer notes ‘just because personal information is made available in some fashion on a social network, does not mean it is fair game for capture and release to all’ (Zimmer 2010:233).

How did we consider the ethical issue and dilemma described above in our study? First, as a matter of ethical procedure, we obtained permission from the selected prophetic ministries to include them in our research fieldwork; this included permission to observe their official new media platforms. But this cannot simply be translated into consent on behalf of those associated with testimonies, stories or updates posted online on the new media platforms of prophetic ministries. As indicated by researchers such as Barnes *et al.* (2015), it would be impossible to gain consent from each individual associated with the stories, testimonies and status updates.

In response to this challenge, we followed Henderson *et al.* (2013:550) who suggested that ‘the issue of consent cannot be resolved through rules but, rather, needs to be an inductive process’. Second, the inductive process as a response to the issue of consent was achieved through applying a phenomenographic approach in the data analysis. A phenomenographic approach maps the phenomenon under study. In this way different narratives are connected in order to gain a broad understanding of the phenomenon (Barnes *et al.* 2015). The focus is, therefore, not on who actually tells the story but rather on the experiential message communicated through the story. Using this approach, our focus during data collection and analysis was on observing and archiving the narratives or discourses rather than on recording the demographic profiles or personal information of the new media users or those whose stories were posted or circulated online. In this way, we protected the privacy of those whose stories were circulated online while maintaining the authenticity of such narratives as data for the study.

Third, data anonymisation protected the identity of the religious testifiers whose testimonies, when shared in an offline context, were extended to an online sphere. While posts or comments placed on new media outlets are easily available to the public with real names and actual faces, we either used the initials of or pseudonyms for those whose real names were mentioned on posts or comments on the new media platforms of the ministries. Using this strategy, we minimised the possibility that the original religious testifier whose testimony was circulated online could be identified.

Applying Ethnographic Observation in a Digital Field

The use of digital ethnography in our study helped us to uncover various religious discourses in the new media outlets of the selected prophetic ministries. The use of this technique, however, raises methodological issues relating to the extent to which an observation can be achieved within the context of a digital space. As an emerging research method, digital ethnography responds to the challenges of doing ethnography in a digital context. Unlike the traditional forms of communication, digital technologies provide various alternative forms of communicating. As such, digital ethnography is unorthodox because it allows the researcher to explore various physical and digital sites in order to ‘seek out ways of knowing (about) other people’s worlds that might otherwise be invisible and that might be unanticipated by more formally

constituted, and thus less exploratory and collaborative, research approaches' (Pink *et al.* 2016:13).

The question then is how can participant observation be achieved in a digital context? Throughout our digital fieldwork, we followed and compiled all the posts and noted the comments and reactions. Following this, we implemented three stages of data coding: open, axial and selective coding (Boeije 2010). Through open coding, we explored, divided and grouped our data into different categories based on the themes and content of each post, review and/or comment. In the axial coding phase, we increased the level of conceptual abstraction and determined the relevance of the categories for our analysis. Using this strategy, we developed a number of main categories that were guided by the study questions. The third phase, selective coding, involved identifying 'connections between the categories in order to make sense of what is happening in the field' (Boeije 2010:114).

Through our digital ethnographic approach, we noted three emerging models in the religious practices of prophetic ministries in Botswana. First, the creation of a new media account in an online platform facilitated the formation of an online community. 3G Ministries in Kopong, for example, provided live blogging of every church service using its Facebook page. The live-blogging created a space for a joint service between offline and online followers. When the posts are read, Facebook users believe they are virtually participating in a religious event although the actual event may be over (Faimau and Behrens 2016). Second, we determined that the patterns of posts, comments and reviews in the new media platforms were uniquely religious. This is characterised by the absence of two-way communication and interaction between new media users which reinforced the idea that religious practice is about a personal relationship with the prophet who represents God.

The selected churches posted messages regularly; however, they did not respond to the new media users. Throughout our digital ethnography, we did not find any response from the new media account owners (prophetic churches) to a comment posted by new media users. Third, new media users posted comments without engaging with the content of the posts. Additionally, comments were normally directed to the main posts and were not in response to another new media user's comment. This creates what can be called the flow of online crowds (Caliandro 2018). The presence of online crowds could be seen in the expression of emotional attachment by simply typing 'Amen', 'Alleluia', 'Praise the Lord', 'daddy', or 'my prophet' without further comments.

Of late, surveys of the use of digital ethnography in studying digital culture reveal that, in many cases, digital culture researchers treat new media platforms as objects of research (Caliandro 2018 and Murthy 2008). Through treating new media platforms as objects of research, these studies maintain the common strategy used in the study of traditional media platforms. Instead of considering new media platforms as merely objects, we approach these platforms as 'a *source* of new methods and languages for understanding contemporary society' (Caliandro 2018:553). Based on this approach, we developed a new understanding of the notions of participation and observation as we designed our digital research fieldwork. We positioned ourselves as off-site non-participant observers. As such, we followed the religious engagement in online platforms without participating physically through posting our own reviews or comments on any online post. While our off-site participation focused on following the patterns of reviews, posts and comments, our observation paid attention to archiving those selected new media platforms.

However, we did become aware that many of the final observations made about the religious landscape of Botswana included data from both the online and offline research. As we could not know the respondents of the online communication in person, it is not clear if their responses truly indicated their beliefs and general thinking. Though we were able to address this by using a multiple methods approach, it does raise questions about the use of digital ethnography, the reliability of online information and the extent to which a person's behaviour in the online world reflects his/her views and behaviour(s) in the

offline environment. Until we can ensure the online self represents the offline self and behaviour, the conclusions from digital ethnography alone may not reflect actual behaviour in the offline world.

Conclusion

In this paper, we reflect on our experience of researching religion and new media in Botswana. Overall, we argued that while interpersonal and communication skills are necessary for the success of research fieldwork; researchers of religion and new media also require practical skills to deal with the complexity and ambiguity around self-positioning, methodology and the ethical considerations of collecting and using online data from the new media outlets of religious institutions. We noted that researching religion and new media has been a growing field over the past two decades. In our view, the main implication for future research in this field is the articulation of ethical boundaries that inform data collection and the analysis of data from digital spaces, particularly in the area of religion, religious institutions and religious practices.

Moreover, future research needs to consider the reliability of online information and the extent to which a person's behaviour in the online world may reflect his/her views and behaviours in the offline environment. While focusing on the practicality of having data relating to religion or religious practices circulated in digital spaces, we also suggest that researchers pay attention to the individual or personal voices, stories or testimonies that inform the existence as well as the credibility of a religious institution through the digitisation of those personal voices and stories. Scholarly interrogation should not only focus on the circulation of narratives by the religious institutions through their new media outlets but also on the dynamics of personal stories or testimonies shared within a religious community and the impact of these stories on individuals as well as religious institutions when such stories are widely circulated online.

Acknowledgement

We are grateful for the insightful comments and suggestions offered by two anonymous reviewers on earlier drafts of this paper. We also acknowledge the involvement of 19 research assistants throughout the data collection phase of our study.

References

Official report

Statistics Botswana 2015. Population and Housing Census 2011: National Statistical Tables. Gaborone: Statistics Botswana.

Secondary sources

Amanze, J 1994. Botswana Handbook of Churches: A Handbook of Churches, Ecumenical Organisations, Theological Institutions, and Other World Religions in Botswana. Gaborone: Pula Press.

Amanze, J 1998. African Christianity in Botswana: The Case of African Independent Churches. Gweru: Mambo Press.

Barnes, N, Penn-Edwards, S and Sim C 2015. 'A Dialogic about Using Facebook Status Updates for Education Research: A PhD Student's Journey', Educational Research and Evaluation, vol. 21 (2), pp.109-121.

Boeije, H 2010. Analysis in Qualitative Research. London: Sage.

Bradley, J 1993. 'Methodological Issues and Practices in Qualitative Research', Library Quarterly, vol. 63 (4), pp.431-449.

Caliandro, A 2018. 'Digital Methods for Ethnography: Analytical Concepts for Ethnographers Exploring Social Media Environment', Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, vol. 47 (5), pp.551-578.

- Campbell, HA 2012. 'Religion and the Internet: A Microcosm for Studying Internet Trends and Implications', *New Media & Society*, vol. 15 (5), pp.680-694.
- Campbell, HA 2013. (ed.), *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media World*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Campbell, HA 2016. 'Framing the Human-Technology Relationship: How Religious Digital Creatives Enact Posthuman Discourses', *Social Compass*, vol. 63 (3), pp.302-318.
- Campbell, HA 2017. 'Surveying Theoretical Approaches Within Digital Religion Studies', *New Media & Society*, vol. 19 (1), pp.15-24.
- Cheung, PH 2016. 'The Vitality of New Media and Religion: Communicative Perspectives, Practices, and Authority in Spiritual Organisation', *New Media & Society*, vol. 1 (8), pp.1-8.
- Cheung, PH, Fischer-Nielsen, P, Gelfgren, S and Ess, C 2012. (eds.), *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture: Perspectives, Practices and Futures*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Day, S 2012. 'A Reflexive Lens: Exploring Dilemmas of Qualitative Methodology through the Concept of Reflexivity', *Qualitative Sociology Review*, vol. 8 (1), pp.60-84.
- Faimau, G 2018. 'The Emergence of Prophetic Ministries in Botswana: Self-positioning and Appropriation of New Media', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, vol. 36 (3), pp.369-385.
- Faimau, G and Behrens, C 2016. 'Facebooking Religion and the Technologisation of the Religious Discourse: A Case Study of a Botswana-based Prophetic Church', *Heidelberg Online Journal of Religions on the Internet*, vol. 11, pp.66-92.
- Gallagher, K 2008. *The Methodological Dilemma: Creative, Critical and Collaborative Approaches to Qualitative Research*. London: Routledge.
- Hackett, RIJ 1998. 'Charismatic/Pentecostal Appropriation of Media Technologies in Nigeria and Ghana', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, vol. 28 (3), pp.258-277.
- Hackett, RIJ 2006. 'Mediated Religion in South Africa: Balancing Airtime and Right Claims', in Meyer, B and Moors, A (eds.), *Religion, Media, and the Public Sphere*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp.166-187.
- Haron, M 2010. 'Religion and the Media: Reflections on their Position and Relationship in Southern Africa', *Global Media Journal African Edition*, vol. 4 (1), pp.28-50.
- Haron, M 2017. 'Botswana's Religious Demographics: A Comparative Insight into Its 2001 and 2011 Censuses', in Grim, BJ Johnson, TM, Skirbekk, V and Zurlo, GA (eds.), *Yearbook of International Religious Demography 2017*. Leiden: Brill, pp.97-107.
- Helland, C 2000. 'Online-Religion/Religion-online and Virtual Communities', in Hadden, JK and Cowan, DE (eds.), *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*. London: JAI Press/Elsevier Science. 205-223.
- Helland, C 2002. 'Surfing for Salvation', *Religion*, vol. 32, pp.293-302.
- Henderson, M, Johnson, NF and Auld, G 2013. 'Silences of Ethical Practice: Dilemmas for Researchers Using Social Media', *Educational Research and Evaluation*, vol. 19 (6), pp.546-560.
- Karaflogka, A 2006. *E-Religion: A Critical Appraisal of Religious Discourse on the World Wide Web*. London: Equinox.
- Landford, M 2018. 'Making Sense of "Outsiderness": How Life History Informs the College Experiences of "Nontraditional" Students', *Qualitative Inquiry*, vol. 25 (5), pp.500-512.
- Markham, A 2013. 'Dramaturgy of Digital Experience', Edgley, C (ed.), *The Drama of Social Life: A Dramaturgical Handbook*. Farnham: Ashgate, pp.279-294.
- Morris, MW, Leung, K, Ames, D and Lickel, B 1999. 'Views from Inside and Outside: Integrating Emic and Etic Insights about Culture and Justice Judgment', *Academy of Management Review*, vol. 24 (4), pp.781-796.

- Murthy, D 2008. 'Digital Ethnography: An Examination of the Use of New Technologies for Social Research', *Sociology*, vol. 42 (5), pp.837–855.
- Oates, C and Riaz, NN 2016. 'Accessing the Field: Methodological Difficulties of Research in Schools', *Education in the North*, vol. 23 (2), pp.53-74.
- Okumus, F, Altinay, L and Roper, A 2007. 'Gaining Access for Research: Reflections from Experience', *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol. 34 (1), pp.7-26.
- Pike, KL 1971. *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structures of Human Behavior*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Pink, S, Horst, H, Postill, J, Hjorth, L, Lewis, T and Tacchi, J (2016). *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice*. London: Sage.
- Rosa, M and Orey, DC 2012. *The Field of Research in Ethnomodeling: Emic, Ethic and Dialectical Approaches*, *Educacao e Pesquisa*, vol. 38 (4), pp.865-879.
- Sarantakos, S 2013. *Social Research*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Shaffir, WB, Stebbins, RA and Turowetz, A 1991. 'Getting In', in Shaffir, RW, Stebbins, BA and Turowetz, A (eds.), *Fieldwork Experience*. New York: St. Martin's. 23-30.
- Togarasei, L 2012. 'Mediating the Gospel: Pentecostal Christianity and Media Technology in Botswana and Zimbabwe', *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, vol. 27 (2), pp.257-274.
- Tsuria, R, Yadlin-Segal, A, Vitullo, A and Campbell, HA 2017. 'Approaches to Digital Methods in Studies of Digital Religion', *The Communication Review*, vol. 20 (2), pp.73–97.
- Ukah, AF 2008. 'Roadside Pentecostalism: Religious Advertising in Nigeria and the Marketing of Charisma', *Journal of African Art History and Visual Culture*, vol. 2 (1-2), pp.125–141.
- Van Maanen, J and Kolb, D 1985. 'The Professional Apprentice: Observations on Fieldwork Role in Two Organisational Settings', *Research in Sociology of Organisations*, vol. 4, pp.1-43.
- Wagner, R 2012. *Godwired: Religion, Ritual and Virtual Reality*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Ward, SJA and Wasserman, H 2010. 'Towards an Open Ethics: Implications of New Media Platforms for Global Ethics Discourse', *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, vol. 25 (4), pp.275–292.
- Zimmer, M 2010. "'But the Data is Already Public": On the Ethics of Research in Facebook', *Ethics and Information Technology*, vol. 12 (4), pp.313-325.