

New Age Goes Online: Relocating Spirituality in Virtual Spaces. The Study of Damanhur

El New Age se vuela Online: Reubicando la espiritualidad en espacios virtuales. El estudio de la comunidad Damanhur

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Recibido: 10-6-2016
Aceptado: 03-9-2016



Abstract

Is internet¹ really a new "electronic temple" where both traditional and New Religious Movements (NRMs) can find and gather their communities? The cryptic rules of ICTs and their capacity of "de-massifyng" and relativizing time and space raises deeper reflections about the human condition as well as the possibility for individuals to reach new levels of transcendence. Several scholars have observed how the internet's "mysterious" nature and functions have opened new possibilities of "re-enchantment of the world" through generating new personal and spiritual empowerment. This research looks at the internet's influence on the virtual activity of Damanhur Spiritual Community, a small esoteric village in Northern Italy. The analysis of the structure of Damanhur's website demonstrates that internet is not merely a tool of communication, but embodies the spiritual philosophy of Community, becoming an empirical part of its values.

Key words: Internet, New Age, Religion, Spirituality, Postsecular, Online.

Resumen

¿Es Internet de verdad un nuevo "templo electrónico" donde tanto las religiones tradicionales como las nuevas pueden encontrar y reunir a sus comunidades? Las reglas generalmente crípticas de las TIC y su capacidad de "fragmentar" y relativizar el tiempo y el espacio, podría plantear reflexiones más profundas sobre la condición humana así como sobre la posibilidad de que las personas alcancen nuevos niveles de trascendencia. Varios académicos han observado como la "misteriosa" naturaleza y funcionalmente de Internet puede abrir la posibilidad de un nuevo "reencantamiento del mundo" a través del aliento de nuevas experiencias espirituales. La influencia de Internet en la espiritualidad puede ser analizada empíricamente en detalle sobre las actividades virtuales de la comunidad de Damanhur, un pequeño pueblo esotérico en el norte de Italia. El análisis del uso del sitio web de Damanhur puede demostrar que Internet no solo es una herramienta de comunicación, sino que puede encarnar la filosofía espiritual de la comunidad, convirtiéndose en una parte empírica de sus valores.

Palabras clave: Internet, Nueva Era, religión, Espiritualidad, postsecular, online.

Sumario

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Cómo citar este artículo

Vitullo, A. (2015): "New Age goes online: Relocating spirituality in virtual spaces. The study of Damanhur Community", *methaodos. revista de ciencias sociales*, 4 (2): 339-348. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17502/m.rcs.v4i2.125>

¹ In this article the word "internet" won't be intentionally capitalized or introduced by article as usually happen for other mass media words as "television" and "radio".

1. Introduction

About fifty years ago, several scholars reconsidered Weber rationalization theory to observe how modern technological advancements have redefined the supremacy of "technological determinism" (Ellul, 1964). According to these theories, modern "machines" have shaped a new model of society based on the domain of industrial and supra-individual social system which definitively bounded individuals in their condition of alienation.

However, in the last three decades, several scholars who observed the spread of information technologies within the postsecular theoretical context argued that new devices produced re-enchanting effects on people's spirituality by altering their perception of reality. These "re-enchantment of technology" theories pointed out that: "Disenchantment thus assumes division of labor and specialization of knowledge inevitably lead to rationalization is questioned by individuals' inability to understand the working of these technologies: moderns lack the knowledge to fully understand how a streetcar, an elevator or a computer operate. To them, it might as well be 'magic' but they trust that the experts know. But do they?" (Aupers e Houtman, 2010: 20)

Turkle (1995) and later Latour (2002) highlighted that people's inability to fully understand how technologies work stimulated the imaginary construction of a magical aura around these new electronic devices. As Davis states: "the logic of technology has become invisible – literally occult. Without the code you're mystified. And no one has all the codes anymore" (1999: 181). According to this understanding, technologies behave like conscious actors that act independently and outside the will of their users (Bailey, 2005).

The new internet era has strengthened this mystical technological fascination. Scholars continued to emphasize the ontology of cyberspace and its abilities to connect individuals with new spheres of perception and knowledge. While internet was still in its primordial stage, Toffler wrote the visionary book *The Third Wave* (1980), predicting that the information age would change the economic and political systems. Postman (1993) coined the term "technophilia" to describe those positive feelings that people had in considering technologies as a new tool to create a fairer society.

Bauwens (1996) tried to categorize these different transcendent understandings in two definitions – "God Project" and "Electric Gaia". The former category conceived internet as a magical tool that supports and completes the spiritual life of individuals, while the latter defined the idea of cyberspace as the "best of all possible worlds". Negroponte (1995) explained this supernatural internet understanding emphasizing the new concept of physical presence reshaped by internet described as a "place without space".

In 1990, Alexander, comparing various American newspaper articles published between 1940 and 1980 on the subject of modern technology usage, already shown that new machines have always been welcomed by metaphysical and religious speculations. About a decade later, Stahl (1999) analyzed 175 articles on the same topic published by Time Magazine, discovering that 36% of articles still contained explicit references to a computer mystic, stating that: "magical discourse seems alive and well in industrialized North America" (1999: 80).

According to Houtman and Aupers (2010): "The computer's radical privatization contradicts the classical social-scientific image of technology as a supraindividual system, dominated by powerful political and economic elites. (...) The privatization of computer technology since the 1960s, moreover, opened the way for an affinity between high-tech and spiritual empowerment."

One of the most recent studies conducted by Pärna (2010) on the "digital apocalypse" – better known as Millennium Bug or Y2K – demonstrate how this technological re-enchantment still persists. The turn of the new millennium raised hysterical manifestations, especially in North America where many people attributed to the possibility of a computer crashing an eschatological meaning for the end of humanity.

During the mid-nineties a new interdisciplinary scholarship emerged, which observed the connection between religiosity and new technology from an alternative perspective. Scholars began to carefully investigate religious groups and their activities on internet to see what aspects of traditional religious practice can truly be translated online, and to what extent religion is adapted to new digital technologies. This new approach to religion and internet is described as digital religion study. In this field of research, scholars consider how religious practice, discourse, and engagement, have become embedded in online and offline contexts and the interconnections between those two contexts.

Within this scholarship, two theoretical and methodological tools that have been formulated are crucial for understanding the conceptual framework of this article. The former is the Religious Social Shaping of Technology (RSST) a methodology developed by Campbell (2010) to observe how religious communities and individuals undergo a sophisticated negotiation process between religious values and technologies to determine how these can affect their religious experience, practices, and life. The latter is the theoretical notion of internet as "sacramental space":

Internet as sacramental space describes the Internet as a place that can be set apart for 'holy use' enabling people to describe online activities as part of their religious life. (...) Internet is not by nature a sacred space, but it can become so through designing the technology in distinct ways or through performing rituals that transform it into a place where the spiritual can be encountered. Spirituality is not embedded in Internet technology; rather it is consciously created or constructed (Campbell, 2005: 11).

This article combines digital religion studies and the re-enchantment of technology theories to analyze the online presence of an Italian New Age movement. Damanhur Spiritual Community represents an exceptional case study on how the notions of spirituality and sacred space are transformed by modern technology and how this connection reshapes the grammar of the sacred in the postsecular age.

2. Conceptual framework

Several authors formulated the concept of postsecular society starting from the observation of the rising of huge a number of New Religious Movements (NRMs) (Beckford, 2012). At the end of the 1960's, the general insurgence of these new religious expressions confirmed that modern rationalization and technique did not undermine people religiosity (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005).

Indeed, as seen before, there could be a strong connection between spiritual empowerment and the use of technology. This relation frequently occurs in NRMs; for example Noomen, Aupers and Houtman (2006) analyzing the affinity between New Age movements and internet's ontology argue that *newagers* can finally experience the philosophical values they promote on cyberspace: freedom of expression, self-empowerment, holistic vision of the world. Cyberspace can be considered as "a worldly reflection or manifestation of the ultimate interconnectedness, which can be achieved by logging into this global network. It is sometimes perceived as a place where 'everything is connected' and as 'truly magical, since all it is energy' "(Moomen et al., 2006: 98). Furthermore, Aupers (2010)'s study on Technopagan community shows how some New Age groups consider cyberspace as a real object of worship.

Although many New Age communities claim a return to the primordial contact between man and nature, other New Age movements consider the use of technologies as an empirical and theoretical part of their philosophy. The following study on an Italian spiritual community serves as a model to observe closely how philosophical and spiritual patterns can be embodied and represented by the use of technologies, in particular by internet.

3. Damanhur Spiritual Community

Damanhur is an esoteric village near Turin, Northern Italy. It was founded forty years ago by Oberto Airaudi (1953-2013), an insurance agent interested in pranotherapy and meditation, which occupied an abandoned farmhouse with twelve people. At the very beginning, Damanhurians aim to create a meeting place for people to experiment new artistic forms. In the following years, the Community developed a complex set of philosophical, spiritual, and eco-friendly principles that have been formally recognize in a constitution:

Damanhur is a School of Thought founded by Oberto Airaudi and inspired by his teachings. Its structure is expressed through the four bodies called *Meditation*: tradition and ritual knowledge; *Game of Life*: experimentation and dynamics; *Tecnarcatò*: continuous inner transformation; and *Social*: the social realization of such teachings. The aims of Damanhur are: the freedom and re-awakening of the Human Being as a divine, spiritual and material principle; the creation of a self-sustaining model of life based on

ethical principles of good communal living and love; the harmonious integration and co-operation with all the Forces linked to the evolution of Humankind².

Damanhur, the largest Italian spiritual community, had about one thousand citizens and is divided into federations. Damjil is the capital of the Community. In each of its federations, Damanhur's citizens live in common houses that can accommodate up to fifteen people. Federations have a self-government headed by a captain and all captains elect the King/Queen Guide who rules the whole Community for a period of six months. Damanhur developed its own currency, the Credit, an "university", and a specific calendar that starts its year on September 1 and provides holidays according to seasonal changes (solstices, equinoxes, etc.). Damanhur offers also several types of citizenships, depending on how long and how far someone lives from the Community.

After becoming Damanhur's citizen, Damanhurians select their sacred name, which is composed by an animal and a plant name. New Damanhurians present their new name to an assembly, and its members can either accept, refuse, or modify the name. Atlantean is Damanhurians' official language which is dated back to the legendary people of Atlantis. This language is composed by a set of graphical symbols that originated from alphabets belonging to different ancient civilizations. Oberto Airaudi (Damanhurian's name: Hawk Dandelion) was the person who first introduced this language to the rest of the Community.

"Damanhur is based upon diversity, change and action, which can be applied to everything within the community"³. Around these key-concepts Damanhurians build all their sacred elements. Most important Community's sacred places are the Temples of Humanity, a huge building (eight square kilometers) entirely dug in the heart of a mountain.

Temples construction began in the 1980s, but nowadays the building is still expanding and transforming as requires the philosophy of incessant change promoted by Damanhur. Its architectural and decorative elements are based on a syncretic representation of all ancient religions, the equality of female and male elements in nature, and the immersion of human beings within the natural environment.

Several Italian scholars and journalists often view Damanhur as a sect (Del Vecchio & Pitrelli, 2011). Although there are many inaccessible and controversial aspects surrounding the rules and the rituals of the Community, this study won't consider Damanhur as a sect because of its openness to the outer world. Indeed Damanhur has close political⁴ and economic⁵ relationship within its territory, the Community is always open to tourist or people who want to live there temporarily, and the main aspects of Damanhur's lifestyle are visible on internet.

This latter element – Damanhur Community's virtual presence – drawn the attentions of this research. According to Damanhur's Constitution: "Spirituality, research and ecology inspire all relationships with the environment, also through the use of appropriate technologies"⁶ and Damanhur's website is one of the most important "technologies" to promote this philosophy. Actually the analysis of the virtual presence of the Community has raised interesting reflections on the possibility that internet could be something more than just a "media" but it could also embody spiritual and transcendental meanings.

4. Methodology

All the information about Damanhur have been collected during a year of periodic visits to the Community. The ethnographic work used participant-observation to examine the Community's life-style, activities, and rituals in order to provide a qualitative-interpretive in-depth analysis of Damanhur's social and spiritual system.

² <http://www.damanhur.org/en/live-community/damanhur-constitution>

³ <http://www.damanhur.org/en/live-community/damanhur-constitution>

⁴ In 1994 Damanhur created its own political party "Con te per il Paese", who succeeded in several administrative elections in Piedmont region.

⁵ As an ecovillage, Damanhur is also financially involved with many local enterprises in producing alternative energy, building eco-friendly housing, and creating electronic devices to listen the "music of the plants" www.musicoftheplants.com/about

⁶ Damanhur's Constitution

Moreover, qualitative data have been collected through direct interactions with Damanhurians. Unstructured interviews have been conducted with people who work for the Damanhur Public Relation Office and Social Media Management Office. The semi-structured interviews not only provided details about the respondents' personal and spiritual lives, but also stories on the creation of Damanhur's online communication. In some cases, these interviews became "narrative interviews" (Tracy, 2013) that encouraged participants to tell stories rather than merely answer questions in order to obtain detailed information about their professional role in Damanhur and their approach to technologies. Finally, this study undertook a year-long observation on Damanhur's website (between 2014 and 2016) to effectively understand how Damanhur's staff structures their virtual presence.

5. Results

In the early 1990s, Damanhur discovered internet's potentialities and created its first website. Throughout the coming years, Damanhur's online communication grew more sophisticated. It developed an efficient multi-language website and different digital platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Flickr, and Youtube, etc. The official Damanhur's Facebook page – "Damanhur Spiritual EcoCommunity" – was launched in 2011, and in the same year, a Twitter account was created. During 2014, "Damanhur Spiritual EcoCommunity" registered a range of visits between 2.500 and 6.000 per day and almost 500 "likes" per month. In the same period, its official Twitter account had almost 12.000 visits per month.

During the time Damanhur started attracting an high number of foreign visitors and internet has become one of the main gates to the Community. In 2014, up to 500 users visited the Italian and English Damanhur's website per day, and the majority of users were geolocalized (see Table 1):

Table 1. Percentage of visitors per country to Damanhur's English and Italian websites.

| Country | % |
|----------------|------|
| United States | 29.8 |
| Italia | 7.5 |
| United Kingdom | 6.65 |
| Germany | 4.77 |
| Canada | 4.34 |
| Australia | 3.74 |
| Holland | 3.67 |
| Brazil | 2.63 |
| Denmark | 2.58 |
| Norway | 2.35 |

Source: Data provided by Devodama, Damanhur's Social Media Office.

The high volume of visitors to Damanhur's website prompted the Community to invest over 30.000 euros to create a new website which was launched on December 22th, 2014. While the website was being updated, an interesting banner appeared on the homepage (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. DAMANHUR. A New Era is Coming.



Source: www.damanhur.info. Translation: "The only real constant in life is changing. In the Federation of eco-spiritual Community of Damanhur, this is our guiding principle. Today, on the 40th anniversary of the birth of the first community, we are on the threshold of a new transformation. You are invited to be part of it too! Join us here on December 21th, day of the Winter Solstice, for the inauguration of the new site. We're making easier and more engaging for everybody exploring and sharing the experience of Damanhur and its richness!".

Damanhur's guiding principles such as transformation, action, and nature, are represented by the new website which is considered a step forth for the persecution of Damanhur's evolution. Because of the convergence of all these reasons the website was launched during one of the most important days for Damanhur's calendar, the Winter Solstice.

In the interview with Ant Coriander, the chief of Damanhur Public Relation Office, she explains how Damanhur's new website is not merely a tool for online marketing, but it represents an empirical part of Damanhur teachings:

Ant: The new website should reflect the completeness and unity of Damanhur's society. You will find our founding pillars listed on the homepage: the spiritual vision, research and experimentation, sustainability, community life, sharing of experiences, art and creativity [see Figure 2].

Figure 2. DAMANHUR. Where Technology and Spirit Meet Each Other.



Source: www.damanhur.info.

Four years ago Ant Coriander grew aware of the role of online communication and she decided to recruit Devodama, an expert team in media management. Tigrilla Gardenia is one of the people working for Devodama, she is the chief of the Social Media Office, and she joined Damanhur in 2011, after working for Microsoft for eleven years. During the interview with Tigrilla and Formica, the connection between Damanhur and new technologies became increasingly evident. They clearly explained how internet's ontology allows them to represent Community's philosophy perfectly.

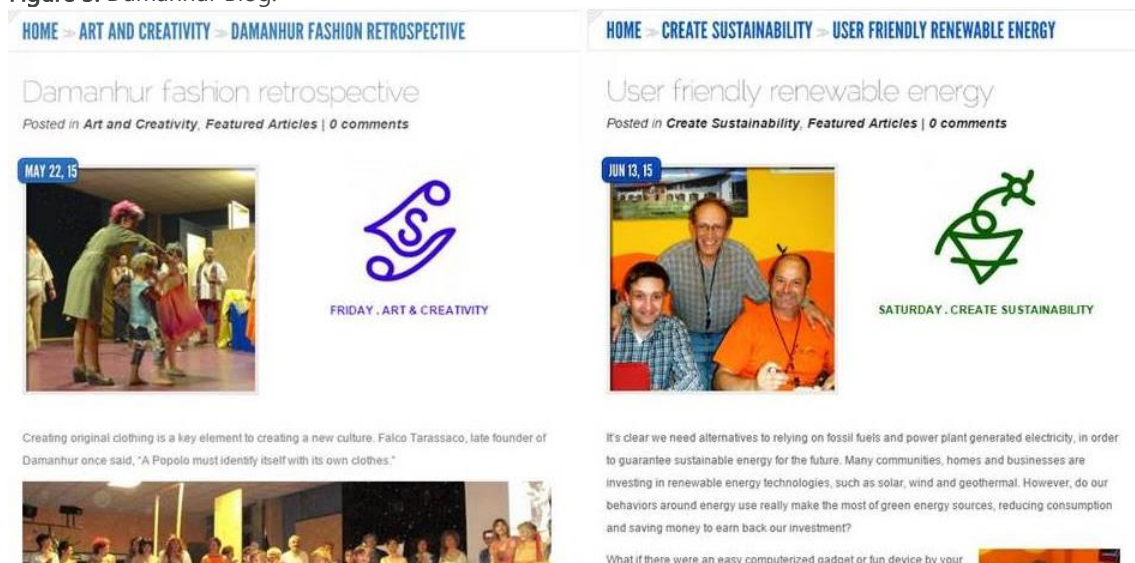
Tigrilla: Damanhur has always had a website since the growth of the Internet. The Community has always been very involved in technologies practical sense of its spirituality. (...) Damanhur as a project for humanity uses different methods to stay connected to the global community. Because of all our different activities, we always have new people working with us and internet gives us this possibility of exchange. When we broadcast our message, for example via internet, we offer people new ideas on certain lifestyles but at the same time, people can also come here and brings new skills to Damanhur. Of course, we have economic returns in this exchange, but what is most important for Damanhur is this exchange of people, because this allows Damanhur to be constantly renewed and the evolution can go on.

To foster this exchange and evolution Damanhur's spiritual notions are embedded in the structure of the website. Devodama's staff chooses and studies suitable graphic strategies to reflect Damanhur philosophy through its virtual presence:

Ant: Our Community touch all aspects of human life and this is difficult to communicate to people who don't know us. Perhaps, only people who visit us will be able to understand this. However, through the new website's structure we strive to communicate the complexity of our social life to people who aren't able to interact with us. The website serves to convey our message to the global community. (...) Now, after the new website has been launched, I can see people arriving here with a much deeper understanding about our society.

Tigrilla: The website is divided into six areas that represent the main pillars of our philosophy and Damanhur's lifetime is also divided into these six sectors. Indeed our spiritual message connects every day of the week to one of the six pillars, a particular color theme, and a symbol from our sacred language. Our blog's content and graphic is also updated daily to reflect these particular spiritual theme. For example, we dedicate Friday to art and creativity, we pick blue as the theme color and a specific symbol in our language to reflect this theme. The blog is then updated to reflect the same characteristics. (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Damanhur Blog.



Source: www.damanhurblog.com.

6. Conclusions

Damanhur website was created according to the philosophy characterizing the Community's lifestyle, which was made possible by the nature of internet. As Ant states: "for example, we can express how all our guiding principles are connected and mixed together through the use of 'links' ". Cyberspace empirically represent some of the core values that Damanhur's community wishes to convey, such as connectivity with the whole world, expansion and sharing of knowledge, transformation and evolution. Damanhur's website could be considered a virtual extension of the Community's territories, thus reflecting the same sacred aura and patterns that characterize the Community's offline presence. In order to enhance users' experience of Community's spiritual atmosphere a virtual 3D tour of the Temples has also been created⁷.

The analysis of Damanhur's understanding and use of internet lies halfway between the digital religion studies and the re-enchantment of technology theories. On one hand, RSST helps to observe how Damanhur' spiritual values are transmitted online. This approach allows this study to examine what decisions and strategies were undertaken by the Damanhur staff to convey their spiritual beliefs on the internet. On the other hand, re-enchantment of technology theories show how internet can be considered as an environment or an object that embodies and convey transcendental meanings. Internet's ontology seems to fit perfectly Damanhur philosophy, it not only serves as a vehicle to transmit Damanhur's teachings, but has also provided Damanhur with new instruments and spaces to empower and expand its spiritual vision.

Reading the phenomenon of religiosity online through a postsecular perspective – intended as a platform to observe the new forms assumed by the sacred in contemporary times (Rosati 2015) – highlights that religiosity as cultural and social phenomenon is not undermined by modernity, but can rather 'take place in quiet unexpected' places, and the task of research is to investigate the logics of these new places and their related practices: domestic altars and televised liturgies, faith-based organizations and chat rooms on the Internet, 'invented religions' [...], on-line religion [...], multi-faith and meditation halls [...]. Are all these phenomena changing the grammar of sacred places? Can a sacred place exist in cyber space?" (Rosati, 2015: 66). Damanhur virtual presence answer these questions by revealing how virtual environment can be consciously designed and conceived following the same grammar of offline sacred spaces.

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⁷ <http://www.tempio.it/>

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