

Gender, Religion and Authority in Digital Media

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Abstract: This article discusses how women's authority to speak about religion is forged in digital media and builds on empirical work focusing on bloggers in a Swedish context and vloggers in a North American context. These studies show how women's self-performances in digital media are characterized by a communicative intention towards authentic self-expression. We argue that these self-performances also enable a particular form of authority to emerge, that is dependent on an individual's personal qualities and ability to inhibit and/or perform certain values; relational and co-effected, and forged in constant connectivity with audiences. Authenticity is a core characteristic of this form of authority in the sense of a connection between being true to your inner self and acknowledging your dependence on others. Finally, vulnerability is an intrinsic part as, on the one hand, a condition enhanced by the socio-technological affordances of digital media and, on the other, as a possibility to challenge stigma, open up spaces of inclusivity and enacting a different ideal of authority.

Keywords: authority, authenticity, trust, vulnerability, women

Genre, religion et autorité dans les médias numériques

Résumé : Cet article analyse la façon dont l'autorité féminine en matière de parole religieuse est forgée dans les médias numériques. Il s'agit d'un travail empirique centré sur les blogueurs dans le contexte suédois et sur les vloggeurs en contexte nord-américain. Cette étude montre que les performances de soi des femmes sur les médias numériques sont caractérisées par l'intention de communiquer l'expression d'un soi authentique. Nous défendons l'idée que ces performances de soi permettent aussi à une forme particulière d'autorité d'émerger, laquelle dépend des qualités

personnelles de l'individu et de sa capacité à inhiber et/ou incarner certaines valeurs. C'est une autorité à la fois relationnelle et coproduite, forgée en connexion constante avec les publics. L'authenticité est l'une des caractéristiques majeures de cette forme d'autorité, entendue dans le sens d'une association entre la fidélité à son for intérieur et reconnaissance de sa dépendance envers les autres. Au final, la vulnérabilité en est une partie intrinsèque, d'une part, en tant que condition mise en lumière par les capacités socio-technologiques offertes par les médias numériques et, d'autre part, comme possibilité d'inverser le stigmate et d'ouvrir des espaces inclusifs ainsi que d'incarner un idéal différent d'autorité.

Mots-clés : autorité, authenticité, confiance, femmes, vulnérabilité

Introduction

This article discusses how women's authority to speak about religion is forged in digital media and builds on empirical work focusing on bloggers in a Swedish context and vloggers in a North American context. These studies show how women's self-performances in digital media are characterized by a communicative intention or drive towards authentic self-expression. In this article we discuss whether these self-performances can also enable a particular form of authority to emerge, that is based on bloggers' and vloggers' competence in communicating with, connecting to and addressing their audiences, rather than formal training or a position sanctioned by a religious institution. A crucial aspect of this process is how digital media affordances as communication and interaction presents challenges for actualizing this opportunity, and how women find strategies to handle this. Furthermore, socio cultural conventions regarding gender and religion in the particular contexts where bloggers and vloggers are situated have implications for this process. On the basis of the aforementioned case studies we outline and discuss the characteristics of a *particular form of authority* emerging in digital media, but also how it relates to women's experiences of speaking out as religious authorities in history.

1. Digital media and religious authority

The growing influence of various forms of media implies new conditions concerning the authority to speak about religion (Hjarvard, 2016). Based on Max Weber's three ideal types of authority: *traditional authority*, *charismatic authority* and *legal-rational authority* (Weber, 1978, p. 215), Campbell (2007; 2010) has documented how changes of authority effect several dimensions of religion as institution, such as hierarchy, structure, ideology, and text. A common theme in literature on media and religion to date has been how authority shifts from being located in religious institutions, to individuals – such as webmasters, bloggers and influencers (Hoover,

2016; Evolvi, 2018). These shifts follows a trend where individuals to a larger extent than before are able to assemble and perform their identities online in new ways through digital resources (Lövheim, 2012; Campbell, 2012; Hutchings, 2014). However, more work is needed on the particular characteristics of these “new” forms of authority that develop outside of, or parallel to, religious organizations.

In this article we begin with Pauline Hope Cheong’s (2013, p. 73) discussion of a *relational* approach to authority as “maintained in *dynamic interaction* between two realities – speaker and audience – that manifest and acknowledge authority.” Quoting Lincoln (1994, p. 4), Cheong describes a crucial aspect of authority as the ability of a speaker to “command not just the attention but the confidence, respect and trust” of the audience, and “to make audiences act as if this were so.” This understanding of authority picks up the theme from Weber’s ideal type of charismatic authority, which is based on *the perceived exceptional personal qualities of an individual* (Weber, 1978, p. 215). Furthermore, it highlights the relational aspects of authority, where authority in digital media is created and maintained in dynamic interaction (Cheong, 2013, p. 73). A crucial aspect of this form of authority thus becomes to perform certain values that generate confidence, respect and trust in a particular audience. This aspect is also emphasized in Lynn Schofield Clark’s (2011) analysis of “consensus-based interpretative authority,” where American talk-show host Stephen Colbert’s ability to establish authority to speak and inform public discourse on religious issues is understood in relation to his ability to appeal to criteria of popularity and consensus among his audience.

2. Self-performance and authority

This article is based on findings generated from two previous studies of women using digital media to express their experiences and opinions concerning religion. The first study analyzed postings and comments to the 20 most popular Swedish female bloggers in the period 2008-2010 (Lövheim, 2011a; 2011b; 2013a; 2013b). The bloggers postings and interactions with readers focused on various aspects of everyday life, fashion and lifestyle, relations, gender ideals and entertainment. Religion as a topic emerged in some of these blogs if the blogger as part of her self-presentation included information about her faith, or in answers to comments concerning her position with regard to issues concerning religion. In a follow up study, four bloggers who more explicitly focused on religion (Islam and Christianity) was analyzed (see further Lövheim, 2012; 2013b). In the Swedish context a minority – approximately 20 percent – of young adults consider themselves to be religious believers and regularly visit religious communities (Klingenberg & Lövheim, 2019). Thus, being religious in contemporary Swedish society is an often questioned, sometimes ridiculed, minority position (Thurfjell, 2015).

The second study focused on the particular vulnerabilities attached to women publishing videos on YouTube (Lundmark, 2019). The study analyzed the videos

and comment sections of 60 US vloggers centering on the topics of atheism and deconversion (from being religious, to identifying as not religious), in relation to their experiences of, on the one hand, publicly performing Atheist identity in the US context – a culture that strongly ties the idea of good citizenship to religiosity (Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006) – and on the other hand, to what it means to speak out as a woman in a minority discourse dominated by men (Lundmark, 2019; Miller, 2013). The purpose was to examine lived non-religion as a performance of a personal and stigmatized identity in a digitally mediated public and on developing an understanding of the visibility and publicness of Atheist identities, and the socio-technological conditions that both afford and constrain them.

The presentations of the bloggers and vloggers that we focus on in this article are thus different from those analyzed in previous research on authority and digital religion. These bloggers and vloggers do not have a position of authority recognized by formal, religious organizations. In most cases their connection to an organization in terms of affiliation or regular practice is occasional or non-existing. Their blogs and vlogs are primarily focused on expressing personal experiences and on constructing and negotiating identity; what we will refer to as self-performances. Self-performance here refers to a perception of the self – or the presentation of the self – as co-effected in a particular social setting; meaning that the self is displayed or enacted in specific ways to fit into, or to create tensions, within a particular set of social circumstances (Lundmark, 2019, p. 62-66). Our purpose in this article is to initiate a discussion concerning these women as representing a particular form of religious authority. This discussion builds on and further explores characteristics and themes in the findings of these studies that have been touched upon but not extensively discussed in previous publications.

As previous research has shown, digital media can open up new spaces for common discussions of gendered and religious conventions for example among US Mormon and evangelical Christian bloggers (Whitehead, 2013) and Muslim women using discussion forums, YouTube or photo sharing websites (Piela, 2016; Vis et al., 2011). In creating such spaces, women commonly share personal, everyday experiences through words and images in order to establish dialogue and intimacy with their audiences. This way of communicating means that the blogger or vlogger assumes a particular position with regard to her audience. Very popular bloggers strive to combine and negotiate the expectations of various positions such as being a friend, moderator, mediator, role-model, or professional entrepreneur (Lövheim, 2011a). One example is the Swedish blogger Clara. Her blog focuses on lifestyle, fashion and design but she occasionally posts on issues related to her Christian faith. In a posting from January 2009 entitled “Super nice and totally stupid” she addresses some of the comments she has received from readers concerning her religiosity:

Do you know what I think about you readers? Well that those of you who are not Christians are idiots! Think about it. What a fuss it would be if I was to actually write this. Still it seems to please many of you to write this to me. That I am an idiot

being a Christian. Some point out that I seem to be too smart to be a Christian. Some question how I, who am so very sensible, can be so nuts that I believe in God.

In response to a second posting from Clara explaining why she became a Christian one of her readers respond:

I am a convinced Atheist. Not Christian at all. I will not say that you contradict the (often exaggerated, carbon-copied) images I have of Christians. However, I still like your blog. There is a certain calmness and strength in you that comes out of your personality. Maybe this has to do with your faith, no matter if I believe that what you believe in is authentic or not, your faith is probably for real (2009-01-26).

Our second example concern YouTube videos made by women in the US speaking out as Atheists (Lundmark, 2019). The self-performances of these women are characterized by a drive towards authentic self-expression. As the quote below shows, their intention of making the videos was in most cases to address the stigma of being an Atheist with regards to dominating US cultural ideas tying “good citizenship” to an idealized Christian identity. By coming out as Atheists on YouTube they challenge this position both in the sense of breaking their own feelings of shame surrounding Atheist identity, and by opening up space for others to express or come to terms with such experiences (Lundmark, 2019, p. 151):

So this is me coming out of the Atheist closet. This is what a teenaged Atheist girl living in America looks like. I love my country, I love my family, and I don't believe in God. I'm strong enough to say it, and I don't think that the way I believe and where I believe my soul will go when I die has anything to do with my character as a person. Nor do I subscribe to the belief that your faith makes you any worse of a person at all. (vlogger strongernow123 in her video)

The vloggers' narrative illustrates processes of claiming a (non-)religious identity position and arguing about the meaning of religion. This is particularly clear in how this vlogger balances between a personal drive of expressing herself authentically in public, and a more or less explicit intention to promote Atheist visibility and begin destigmatizing Atheist identity within US society. In the following exchange a vlogger – JJTalkz – enters into discussion with one of her commenters – fine killer – who seemingly goes in to question her position as an Atheist and trying to engage her in debate without offering an explanation as to why JJTalkz should listen to this commenter's opinion. When JJTalkz playfully (signaled by her use of textspoke) bites back she is accused of being aggressive:

Be whatever you want but dont be an atheist thats what I believe. do you know why? (fine killer)

+fine killer because i should listen to faceless ppl on the interwebz? (JJTalkz)

why do you have to be so aggressive, I didnt say anything bad (fine killer)

+fine killer please highlight and annotate my aggression (JJTalkz, JJTalkz comment section)

These examples show how bloggers and vloggers' become someone who speaks out in public about their beliefs and opinions through sharing personal experiences that challenge or negotiate the meaning of certain religious values and identities in a particular context. What furthermore emerges from these examples is that they might not aspire to an authoritative position through doing so, but often become drawn into discussions concerning with what authority they speak out on certain issues in interaction with their readers or viewers. This is expressed in the following quote by the vlogger Haley Volgs when addressing her viewers:

I hope this made sense to you, and I hope you're not offended, but if I did offend you I'm not taking anything I said back, because these are my beliefs and I stand by my belief system, because that's what I believe I'm not gonna change what I believe to make other people happy, and you shouldn't either and I'm say... You have every right to religion um I may disagree with your belief system but... if that's what you believe in and you have every right to believe in it and I'm not gonna tell you to believe something else. (Haley Vlogs, video)

This is an example of how vloggers and bloggers position as authorities is based on how they *epitomize issues and tensions that resonate with readers or viewers*. Whether they are accepted as holding a position to speak publicly about these issues is established and negotiated in conjunction with their audiences, and is highly dependent on how they are able to present ways of handling these issues/tensions that can generate trust and respect from those audiences. In the case of the blogger Clara as well as the Atheist vloggers in Lundmark's study (2019), they can be seen to position their identity performances as self-expressions rather than political statements, introducing a rupture between their own beliefs and a drive towards convincing those around them of the "correctness" of their position. Thus, the tendency is for them to simultaneously perform self authentically – meaning, being visibly Christian or Atheist – and a wish for that self to be accepted, and not to be seen as an insult or attack on others.

3. Authenticity as relational and temporal

As these examples show, authenticity proves to be central for how these women forge authority in conjunction with their audiences. Authenticity in connection with digital media and religion has previously been discussed with regard to the distinction between "real" and "virtual." Kerstin Radde-Antweiler (2013, p. 89) makes the distinction between authenticity as a category of deciding whether for example religious beliefs, experiences and spaces are part of a given religious system or not. This understanding of authenticity is close to the dictionary meaning of the word as "original" or "faithful to an original." In understanding the relation between female bloggers and vloggers speaking out on tensions and dilemmas with regard to the role of religion in their lives, what seems to be needed is a concept of authenticity as an individual quality, but related to the ability to enact certain beliefs or values, in order to establish authority in relation to an audience.

Building on this work we propose using authenticity as a way to approach how authority is forged in digital settings via the performative enactment of certain beliefs or values. Philosopher Charles Guignon (2004; 2008) introduces an understanding of authenticity as a quality expressed by someone, when “his or her actions truly express what lies at their origin, that is, the dispositions, feelings, desires, and convictions that motivate them” (Guignon, 2008, p. 278). Guignon argues that modernization, in particular the Romantic movement, introduced a strong inward turn in understanding authenticity, which undermined an earlier ideal of authenticity as realizing a purpose given us in the larger, divine, scheme of things. Therefore, to be authentic requires to pull oneself back from the entanglements of social life in order to get in touch with one’s real, innermost self. Drawing on the work of German philosopher Martin Heidegger, Guignon argues that the connection between the self and the social needs to be reestablished in the conceptualization of authenticity. Heidegger’s understanding of human beings as always already “thrown” into the world, shows that authenticity is, firstly, inherently relational and, secondly, something temporal or emerging. According to Guignon’s interpretation of Heidegger, the “inner self” is “...what becomes manifest in giving shape to one’s identity through one’s worldly expressions, and the individual [is] just the configuration of possibilities that have been taken over from the public world and given form in taking a stand in the world” (Guignon, 2008, p. 283).

Instead of using authenticity as a concept expressing personal characteristics (the “true self” of an individual), this line of thinking enables us to see it as something deeply connected to, and shaped by, a particular situation of human interaction. Guignon argues that, since the self is always inextricably bound up with the public world, being authentic, demands that we see ourselves as fundamentally social creatures, embedded in relationships and communities (Guignon, 2004). If we understand authority as a relational concept, based on a person’s ability to inhabit certain moral qualities, that are established and maintained by gaining the confidence, respect and trust of an audience, then this form of authenticity is a prerequisite for authority. The understanding of authenticity as a personal *and* social characteristic furthermore ties it to a particular type of social setting, in connection to values concerning the common good prevalent in this setting. In other words, becoming an authority on the basis of authenticity means to enact certain shared values within a particular social setting.

4. Vulnerability and authority online

Another salient aspect in the experiences of the bloggers and vloggers we have studied is vulnerability. The Swedish bloggers often brought up and responded to emotions expressed by readers in their comments in later blog posts (Lövheim, 2013a). This was particularly the case with critical comments. A salient part of these concerned feelings of anger or disappointment towards bloggers on the grounds of them not being considered as authentic. Readers criticized the bloggers for being

boastful and greedy, for being bad role models, or not caring enough for their readers. Thus, bloggers were seen by readers as disrupting the connection between the values they advocated and the way they inhabited these values in relation to their readers.

One of these values was maintaining a reciprocal relationship between bloggers and readers. As bloggers were to a large extent dependent on traffic to their blogs in order to attract advertisement etc., it was important for them to continuously re-establish this connection between personal and social aspects of authenticity. The blogger Clara writes a post in February 2014 commenting on her decision to look for sponsorship from companies that support – and produce – the kind of goods and services that she is focusing on in her blog.

As a blogger I write 365 days a year and entertain hundreds of thousands of readers, of which some while consuming this material freely are horrified over the number of ads present at the blog. This was the case in my former blog as well. Why are blogging girls (because we are mostly girls) expected to produce content for well attended channels, larger than many magazines, without getting paid?

One of her readers responds (2014-02-09):

I think people react so strongly because what you represented before: small scale, simplicity, non-commercialism etc. has taken a blow. Now you are standing in the middle of a commercial channel. Of course you should be allowed to earn money from what you do. [...] But am perhaps also afraid that the blog will become more mainstream now when you are more controlled by others/bought up. [...] wish you all the best, but hope that you will continue being the Clara we previously have gotten to know.

Blogs can be seen as examples of a shift in communicative practices wherein self-performance “becomes the message as well as the mode of communication,” while inviting new forms of relationality (Lövheim, 2013a, p. 13). This highlights how digital media brings with it particular concerns in relation to vulnerability, as online environments actualizes and heightens issues of identity, privacy, and existential anxiety (Lagerkvist, 2017, p. 104). These issues not only have ethical implications, but impacts notions of self-hood, relationality and presence, particularly as social media spaces begin to erode boundaries between public and private (Lagerkvist, 2017, p. 105). The self cultivated in social media space is on exhibit (Miller & Shepherd, 2004, p. 16), and thus a self under scrutiny. On the part of the blogger and vlogger, the awareness of this scrutiny is displayed via assurances of authenticity and through authenticity displays.

The presented examples show that the kind of authority that a blogger or vlogger can have in regard to her readers or viewers is based on her competence in communicating with, connecting to and addressing the experiences and needs of her audience. In understanding the part that vulnerability plays in this process of being perceived as authentic, and to become accepted as an authority through gaining confidence and trust in dynamic interaction with audiences, Arlie Hochschild's

(1979; 2012) theory of “emotional work” is a fruitful starting point. Hochschild describe emotional work as performed through the display of bodily and facial gestures in a situation, of which two basic forms are the “evocation” of desired feelings and the “suppression” of undesired feelings (Hochschild, 1979, p. 561). Furthermore, emotion work takes place in social exchange; it can be performed by the self upon others, and by others upon the self. In these exchanges “feeling rules” establish what is owed in terms of emotional gestures between people (Hochschild, 2012, p. 56). These rules are expressed in assessments and sanctions that become visible particularly in moments of discrepancy between expressed feelings and expected feelings in a certain situation. Such moments bring out the underlying ideals and conventions of social interaction and identities (Hochschild, 1979, p. 567).

Lundmark’s study showed that while it is important to keep in mind the particular vulnerabilities attached to women and minorities when speaking in public, in ways that forces them to negotiate charges of inauthenticity as well as exposes them to linguistic (as well as sometimes physical) violence, this vulnerability should not be seen as a deficiency (Lundmark, 2019, p. 223). As will be discussed further in the final part of the article, while the particular characteristics of this vulnerability no doubt prevents many important voices from speaking out in public, those who do are able to work as a locus for different type of public imaginings. So while battling gendered and racial tensions, the women Atheist vloggers are also able to co-effect spaces marked by solidarity, hope, and encouragement (Lundmark, 2019, p. 227).

5. Tracing relational authority through history

As pointed out in the previous section digital media is characterized by particular socio-technical affordances with implications for how authority to speak about religion can be forged. Nevertheless, the characteristics of how bloggers and vloggers forge authority in digital media today resonates with aspects that have characterized women’s attempts to speak publicly about religion in history. In considering the implications of new, digital forms of communicating religion for, in this case, women it is important to look back to earlier forms of such communications. This concerns not least the question of whether and how “new” forms of media technology may change previously established social, cultural and religious conventions and norms about gender. While being mindful of the risk of making ahistorical parallels where characteristics of contemporary society are used as templates to explain life in “pre-modern” or “traditional” society, we will point out connections to historical examples of women speaking with authority about religion. As argued by Pamela Klassen and Kathryn Lofton (2013) we can identify some characteristics in how Christian women have expressed their religious experiences in public setting across time. One of these concern how women’s bodies have played a key role, at once as a source for their authority *and* their exclusion as legitimate witnesses of faith. Another recurrent theme is women’s use of

experiences and insights from their personal, everyday life and the social relations they are involved. In a similar vein, Swedish Church historian Eva Haettner Aurelius (1993) argues that certain common characteristics can be found in contexts where women have been able to speak and write with authority on religion in a public setting, such as within Scandinavian and European monastic orders in the 11- 13th century, and in the pietistic, revival movements emerging in Germany and Sweden in the 17 and 18th century.

These women seem to have had more authority to speak about sacred things in times when a religious movement was being established, or in periods of transformation such as expansion or division between various groups, while centralization, establishing of dogma, formalization of education and leadership rather seem to stifle their voices. Aurelius also point out that the voices and experiences of women seem to have had more salience in movements where theological ideas emphasized the significance of mystical experience; intense, direct, inner experience or sensation as ways of gaining knowledge about god. She shows that where such theological ideas where encouraged or at least seen as legitimate, the experiences of women found a way into the public sphere of the Church (Aurelius, 1993, p. 95). These women's accounts of visions and of the workings of god in their lives where highly emotional, and often involved bodily sensations, pain, anxiety and joy. Depictions of their own vulnerability were also frequent, such as in their descriptions of being merely vessels for the power of god. The theme of vulnerability also comes across in how, as the history of the Christian church shows, women as religious authorities in the Middle Ages were frequently de-legitimized by referencing these types of experiences: their embodied experience and their sexuality were described as sinful or as a temptation for others (men) to stray away from the path of godly life because of their "greater weakness." Women were also in constant risk of being accused of heresy (Aurelius 1993, p. 88).

Aurelius points out that these women's articulations of their own position and their legitimacy to speak about religion is most salient in texts presenting their dialogues with, or defense against, judges and clergy in trials or other proceedings set up to assess whether their visions and acts were "authentic" (Aurelius 1993, p. 97). The implicit and explicit accusation against the authenticity of their religious experiences thus forced them to position themselves as authorities. A position that, Aurelius argues, women mystics in the Middle ages, as women within the romantic Pietistic revival movements, seldom aspired to. In their understanding, to express one's subjective experience of the divine was not a way to realize the unique authentic self but to become more like god, to realize gods greater plan with humanity. Thus, these women saw themselves as describing god's wishes for humanity, and their personal stories where told in order to awaken the faith of others.

6. New media – new dynamics

So far, we have discussed certain characterizes of the form of authority we are aiming to understand, using examples from present day bloggers and vloggers and connecting these to historical narratives about women speaking with authority about religion in public. To recapitulate; the form of authority that we seek to outline is relational; based on establishing and maintaining the confidence, respect and trust of an audience. It is dependent on authenticity, expressed through an individual's personal qualities and ability to inhibit and/or perform certain values in a particular social setting, but also on her ability to acknowledge her dependency on others (the audience). Vulnerability is a significant theme in this process, both in the sense of exposing weaknesses, brokenness, shortcomings and in the sense of being exposed to criticism from those from whom confidence and trust is given.

The examples of how women spoke out as religious authorities in history remind us of how different forms of authority have always existed within religion, even though these have often been marginalized by the establishing of a dominant tradition. Bringing in the historical experiences of women speaking out as religious authorities help us understand more of how the technological affordances of digital, social media such as blogs and YouTube, shape authority. In other words – in what ways is this a new form of authority? This is a question that demands more research and discussion, not least over time. Important aspects highlighted by our own work that should be kept in mind for future research is the space and importance of the personal in digital spheres, the centrality of visibility, and the precarity of performing a coherent self in relation to the vast amount of information bloggers and vloggers generate about themselves. In other words, it is not merely that user generated media is user *generated* (Lange, 2007); it is to a large degree about the users themselves – it is the exposure of their biographies, stories and anecdotes told to generate sympathy, for illustration, for purposes of entertainment etc. (Burgess, 2015; Leaver & Highfield, 2018). As such they can be seen as extensions of vloggers' and bloggers' personhood, or at the very least as blurring the boundary between self and image, between public persona and private individual (Kim, 2012). This of course raises concerns of how the self in itself is being turned into an object for sale, how it is imbricated and objectified via the neoliberal logics which prompts vloggers' and bloggers' – as well as the average person using various kinds of social media – to think of themselves as “brands” (Kim, 2012; Svensson, 2014). The self as a brand is interesting not least because for the brand to be seen as authentic it must be seen as consistent, necessitating the sort of coming out videos some of the Atheist vloggers engaged to allow for a change in personal beliefs or habits – or for a by audiences *perceived* change of beliefs. Moreover, this self-performance as brand is tied to and dependent on visibility, and thus effected by audience reactions in the form of views, comments, likes, online violence in the form of “trolling” and other forms of hate speech, as well as the black box technologies of algorithms which sorts and organizes our digital experience and existence (Leaver & Highfield, 2018; Thompson, 2005).

Lövheim's study of female bloggers and Lundmark's study of female Atheist vloggers suggests that these heightened dynamics of visibility, commercial dynamics, sorting, and harassment is particularly challenging for women in the process of establishing as well as maintaining authority. Sorting processes and harassment brings into question the social part of authenticity, of maintaining connectivity, and gaining the trust and confidence of readers, and challenges bloggers' and vloggers' ambitions to acknowledge their dependency on others. Thus, even if the control of religious authorities might be weakened by practices in digital media spaces, in comparison with the situation in the Middle ages, the technological affordances of social media generate new forms of social control, which enhance and challenge the relational, performative and vulnerable aspect of authority. Looking back at our previous discussion of authenticity we can see that social media by establishing a new form of public sphere that blurs previous understandings of private and public, original and fake information, friends and influencers, followers and trolls, enhances the character of the authentic self as "... the configuration of possibilities that have been taken over from the public world," as well as the challenges of acting authentically by managing "...the structures of human being in a particular form at a given time" (Guignon 2003, p. 283).

7. Co-effected authority

The final point that we will discuss concerns relational authority as co-effected. The concept of co-affected authority brings out how, among women and other marginalized groups, claiming authority is a process with ambiguous consequences. As described above women speaking out publicly on religion are often critiqued and questioned by their various audiences. Furthermore, these women seldom aspire to a position of authority. Research on women mystics in the Middle ages and the early pietistic revival movements point to how, in the writings we have access to, these women are positioned as potential, authentic or heretical, authorities through debate with others, often by those accusing them. Bloggers and vloggers in our studies were also "called out" by readers as spokespersons or role models for various groups and opinions, and were very ambivalent about this. One example is the Swedish blogger Gina Dirawi, with a Muslim background, who back in 2010 in responded to a debate about proper conduct and clothing for pious Muslim women, and wrote in her blog: "I have NEVER said that I am a perfect Muslim" and "I am no representative for Muslims, I am just an ordinary girl who happens to be Muslim" (Lövheim 2012).

Similarly, Lundmark's study show that vloggers are more often concerned with authentic self-expression than explicit activism or leadership (Lundmark, 2019, p. 110-113). Furthermore, interactions between vloggers and their audiences were characterized by a depiction of vloggers as role-models or screens of projection for critique, were they by critics were accused of not being Atheist enough, or told not to take up space (Lundmark, 2019, pp. 159, 221–222, 229). Accusations of not being

Atheist enough and overt e-bile that denigrates the vloggers' wish to approach Atheist identity in a complex manner, often come from viewers identifying as male secularist or Atheists. Comments from Evangelical Christians on the other hand, expresses that that the vloggers are to be pitied, or question their previously held Christian beliefs as having been inauthentic, framing their stories of deconversion fundamentally untrue (Lundmark, 2019, pp. 210, 222).

Lundmark argues that vloggers self-performance thereby can be seen as *co-effected* in emergent relationality (Lundmark, 2019, p. 217). By this she means that vloggers' self-performances are simultaneously structured by the socio-technological affordances of YouTube, and by a form of agency – a creative act using the structural constraints to convey a certain message or purpose. As with the women in the Middle ages, the bloggers and vloggers expressions of selves emerge in relation to others; her religious surroundings, her imagined viewers. The interaction among vloggers and commenters in Lundmark's study is characterized by the vloggers' subversion of Christian privilege as it exists in the US context, as well as by a rupturing of hegemonic patriarchal structures within Atheist discourse (Lundmark, 2019, p. 222). This discourse and the ideal of the authoritative Atheist is in turn used by some viewers to undermine the vloggers' identity, but it is also *used by the vloggers* to argue for another form of authority. Lundmark found that vloggers, for example, used calls for respect to perform their Atheist identities openly – being their authentic selves – while maintaining empathic connection and understanding with audiences who might object to their atheism. In this sense the vloggers enact a space for promoting mutual understanding and respect for persons of any faith expression. In this way, she argues, their recognition of their marginal position is also part of a collective effort to transform normative modes of identity and sociality, in the social and political context they are living (Lundmark, 2019, p. 232). Thus, this vulnerability enables women to co-effect “spaces of inclusivity and of personal import. Spaces that have the ability to challenge notions of what can and should be said in public, and how those who subvert idealized notions should be approached” (Lundmark, 2019, p. 238).

In sum, the strong connection between authenticity, vulnerability and interaction with an audience that we have presented constructs a form of authority that is seldom self-claimed or formally given, but co-effected and legitimized through the connection between realizing one's own true self and recognizing one's dependency upon, and solidarity with, others. Co-effected and relational authority can be forged through strategies of using comments in blogs to build authenticity by performing emotional work, recognizing stigma, or speaking out on behalf of others. In this process women may use arguments meant to undermine their authority as platforms for constructing new forms of authority.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we have presented some characteristics concerning how the ways in which women speak out in public through social media about religion can be conceived as a particular form of authority. This form of authority is 1) relational, based on the confidence, respect and trust of an audience in a particular setting; 2) dependent on an individual's personal qualities and ability to inhibit and/or perform certain values; 3) an ongoing, fragile condition, forged in constant connectivity with audiences. A core characteristic of this authority is, furthermore, 4) authenticity in the sense of a connection between being true to your inner self and acknowledging your dependency on others. Finally, 5) vulnerability is a significant part of establishing authenticity and authority through emotional work, recognizing stigma, showing respect for others, all of which might be seen as affirmations of perceived common values among audiences. This leads us back to the first point, the relational character of this type of authority, which means that for religious minorities or stigmatized groups, this authority might seldom be self-claimed, but rather co-affected through critique and challenge, as well as support from audiences. Acknowledging and embracing dependency, similarity, and solidarity is a way of ensuring legitimacy as well as enacting a different ideal of authority.

This final point raises a question: why then refer to the way in which the women we have studied talk about religion through digital media as authority? Why is this not an example of individual religious identity construction? If we can talk about a more general trend in how religion is experienced, articulated and practiced in digital media – and society in general – as a shift from religious institutions to individuals, then personal religious identity is not just “personal” anymore. It is also, to different degrees, public. Or rather, a blurring of previously accepted bounds of publicness (Berlant, 1998; Campbell, 2013; Hinton & Hjorth, 2013; Warner, 2005). In line with Warner (2005) we argue that this blurring is enacted not simply to be visibly different, but aims to transform normative identities and forms of sociality (Lundmark, 2019). As our studies of female bloggers and vloggers show, women engage in practices that are simultaneously purposefully public, while retaining a sense of intimacy previously reserved for ones' intimate, personal sphere (Lundmark 2019, p. 235-238, Lövheim 2011b). They are public in as much as they rely on previously established ways of communicating a particular identity, and in as much as they find resonance with their audiences (Lundmark, 2019). Thus, personal experiences expressed through writing, speaking or sharing images about religion in digital media is part of a broader discussion regarding the legitimate ways and forms of constructing religious authority in contemporary society.

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