INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL ISSUE ON DIGITAL TANTRA

Digital Tantra: Introducing a New Research Field

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The study of digital media and religion is not a new field of inquiry any longer. On the contrary: in the period of more than twenty years since the earliest studies on the subject, digital religion succeeded in becoming an established and acknowledged academic discipline. Existing research today covers a wide range of approaches, methods, and themes. At the same time, we see that within the existing diversity of studies, for some time a focus on certain religious traditions (and world regions) had persisted. But since about 2015, digital religion has been constantly expanded to include more hitherto under-researched religious traditions, such as digital Buddhism,[1] digital Judaism,[2] digital Islam,[3] and, finally, digital Hinduism.[4]

It is that field of study precisely—digital Hinduism—which indeed is the closest to digital Tantra so far. In fact, and not surprisingly, a small number of works that have been published under the umbrella of digital Hinduism already point at and touch upon themes which can also be termed digital Tantra.[5] Given the adjacency of some practices which are relevant for both specific Hindu and (often *dakṣiṇācāra*

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[1] For example, Grieve and Veidlinger 2015; Grieve 2016; and Veidlinger 2019.

[2] For example, Campbell 2015.

[3] For example, Muhanna 2016.

[4] Zeiler 2020.

[5] For example, Scheifinger 2010; Borkataky-Varma 2020; and Sinha 2020.

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Hindu) Tantric traditions,[6] this overlap is to be expected and quite naturally adds to the benefits of both research fields—digital Hinduism and digital Tantra. Additionally, the new research theme digital Tantra can benefit from some content findings and the already initiated methodical and theoretical reflections in digital Hinduism research.[7] For example, studying online *pūjā* practices, a theme which has been at the center of digital Hinduism already since about 2005,[8] will certainly also be highly relevant for digital Tantra. Other existing themes that are expected to play a role in future digital Tantra research include but are not limited to studying websites and social media presences (on Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, and many more social media platforms) of groups and individual actors such as *guru*s or ritual specialists.

Digital Tantra is the so far newest addition to the ever-expanding list of digital religion subfields. As a new research theme, we understand digital Tantra to be situated within the contexts of the broader digital Religion academic field—a fact that is reflected, among other things, in the use of methods and theoretical reflections applied to the new data. It also means that when defining the scope of digital Tantra, we acknowledge that "'Digital religion' does not simply refer to religion as it is performed and articulated online, but points to how digital media and media spaces are shaping and being shaped by religious practice" (Campbell 2013: 1). Research on digital Tantra hence includes studying Tantra (such as Tantric practices or Tantric beliefs) online with media-centered approaches.[9] But the new research field also extends beyond such media-centered studies to include investigations of debates or processes sparked by online representations and presences. These may take place both in digital as well as nondigital spaces and are often studied with actor-centered approaches.[10] Applying diverse approaches will support us in studying larger research questions related to media and Tantra and in deciphering "how the intensified media production, use and reception in many parts of Asia have led to transformations which, among other things, strongly influence the rearrangements of religious settings, reaching from consolidations of the existing structures in some cases to their restructuring in others" (Zeiler 2019: 9).

The idea to focus particularly on digital Tantra was first conceptualized by the two editors of this special issue at the American Academy of Religion (AAR) conference in 2018, which then led to a rich panel discussion of this theme at the AAR in 2019. Both editors as mentioned above have been tracking the developments of Hindu Tantra in various digital media; for example, on the Internet, in social media spaces, and in video games. The current representations and interpretations of Tantra in digital media genres are manifold. They include more direct and "text-conform" representations as well as very radical transformations. For example, akin to how neo-Tantra took on a life of its own in the 1960s in

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[6] For example, *havana*, *bali*, and certain *pūjā* practices such as *vaśīkaraṇa*.

[7] For an overview on these, see, for example, Gittinger 2021; and Zeiler 2022.

[8] For example, Karapanagiotis 2010; Scheifinger 2010; and Borkataky-Varma 2020.

[9] For example, see Borkataky-Varma (2020) on Hindu *Śakta* Tantra on the Internet and online *pūjā*s for Tripurasundarī.

[10] See, for example, Ford 2022, in this special issue.

the United States, which in some instances for practical purposes shared only the term "Tantra," we find similar trajectories emerging in the digital Tantra space. Nevertheless, as scholars of Tantra, digital religion, and now also digital Tantra, we do not reject or diminish the content and the ways in which people interpret Tantra in the digital realm, but see these developments as a very important new field which adds to our overall understanding of how religion is practiced today.

While digital Tantra is just beginning to emerge as a research theme, one defining characteristic is visible at this point already. In line with the vast complexity of what Tantra may mean, represent, and encompass to varying audiences, digital Tantra naturally must be understood as referring to *all* Tantric traditions, in *all* world regions, and as related to *all* digital platforms.[11] Consequentially, this special issue includes articles focusing on data relevant to the study of Hindu Tantra and beyond,[12] in South Asia and beyond.[13]

The special issue opens with an article by Seth Ligo. In "Kāśī Kṣetra, Kāśī Maṇḍala: Digitally Mapping Evolving Interpretations of an Idealized Sacred City," the author employs digital maps to compare and contrast the intentional shifts in how sacred geographies are renegotiated in Vārāṇasī, a city in North India. Ligo further considers how the new geographical maps may push the ritual boundaries, and thereby possibly create a new cosmogony of sorts.

Tine Vekemans, in "#MagicMantras: Bhaktamar Mantra Healing Between Jainism and the Spiritual Marketplace" addresses the Bhaktamar Mantra Healing (BMH), a healing practice based on a popular Jain *Bhaktāmar Stotra*. The author succinctly showcases creative ways in which Tantra has been interwoven into BMH, which has resulted in a systematized, democratized, and to an extent commodified brand of spiritual healing available on the spiritual marketplace. Vekemans makes the final argument that approaching BMH as a *Tantric reconfiguration* emerging from an encounter of a Jain practice with consumer culture is helpful to make sense of what sets BMH apart from other uses of Jain *mantra*s, and of the importance of the digital space, BMH has made for itself.

Renée L. Ford takes us into the world of Tantric Tibetan related Buddhism on Facebook in her article, "We Don't Need the Guru: Shambhala Facebook Group and (Re)Creating Vajrayana Buddhism." The author focuses on the Shambala group and some of its recent controversies. Ford teases out the complex and occasional controversial student-teacher relationship and how the digital spaces negotiate power and religious authority. Ford engages deeply with Heidi A. Campbell's theory on the negotiation of reciprocity and agency between individuals and the community.

Finally, Hugh B. Urban in "Dark Webs: Tantra, Black Magic, and Cyberspace," examines the changing nature of Tantra in the digital era by focusing on three online *tāntrik* practitioners from Assam, a state in north-east India. By exploring the various services provided by people from this geographic region including black magic under the Tantra banner, the author argues that these Assamese cyber-

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[11] Also see Zeiler 2023.

[12] For example, Vekemans on digital Jain Tantra.

[13] For example, Ford on digital Buddhist Tantra in the "West."

*tāntrika*s reflect at least three key transformations in the practice and representation of Tantra: deeply challenge the traditional understanding of religious authority within the larger world of Tantra; how cyberspace feeds into and from the popular imagination; and how neo-Tantra has woven itself into this newfound cyber Tantric world.

Overall, this special issue aims at introducing and critically discussing various facets of digital Tantra and at exemplifying the geographical diversity of the developments as well as the necessary methodical interdisciplinarity frameworks to study these. The articles allow for interdisciplinary reflections that will help map out future research agendas and implications of the newly emerging research field of digital Tantra. Thus, this special issue offers a first glimpse into the new field, by presenting case studies from recent scholarship that, for the first time, exemplify the complexity and variety of digital Tantra. As editors of this special issue, we believe that such an inclusive approach to the study of Tantra in academia will contribute to push the traditional Tantra scholar to consider the *lived* practices, especially spaces that are driven by algorithms, emojis, and a digital footprint.

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