

GSM TECHNOLOGY AND ITS USE IN RELIGIOUS LIFE: A PRELIMINARY INQUIRY

by

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GSM technology with all its highly interactive services and tools is closely related to the Internet and its growth in last few years has been enormous. It allows viewing the GSM communication space as the new terrain of scientific research. This study examines the way in which religious groups as well as the individuals use the GSM technology (including the service of SMS and MMS) in the Czech Republic. Communication - in all of its technologically available forms - is the important and official use of mobile phones. GSM technology - connected with Internet - also provides SMS services with biblical quotes or reminders with religious topics. Another characteristic of GSM use is the production and distribution of MMS with religious pictures (symbols). What was also found was the strong missionary effort of particular religious groups as well as of individual members, reflected in excessive GSM spamming. The typology is developed and the way in which mobile phones affect contemporary religious practice is discussed in this study.

INTRODUCTION [1]

In last few years, the Internet, creating almost global cyberspace, achieved vast growth as for the development of technological possibilities, accessibility (in the meaning of growing expansion, and lowering the acquisition and operation costs) and as for the impact on all kinds of human activity. Both scholars and users view this boom as an information revolution and we can state the importance of this revolution - affecting such a number of social, political, cultural and of course religious activities - is comparable with the consequences of other revolutions, however political or industrial.

But there is one more technology achieving the similarly profound upturn – the technology of GSM. This technology is closely related and interacted with the Internet. Using mobile phones became a phenomenon rapidly. There is hardly a sphere which would remain untouched by the enormous emergence of the use of mobile phones and it is more than obvious that it affects also religion and religious life of groups as well as of individual believers. Likewise the Internet creates the space defined by the concept of cyberspace, GSM networks - including all services, users and telephone devices with all types of tools – create a unique and more than interesting GSM space.

Generally speaking, mobile phones are no longer exclusively communication devices, but they constitute a space, which deserves the attention of scholars. Talking about religion and religious life, cellular phones became both source and useful tool for examining the religious activity of groups and individuals. It follows that GSM expansion does not affect only the participants of GSM communication space, but the researchers too. This entails, apart of other things, that for scholars it is necessary to gain new information on technological innovations continuously, to be qualified in using the news and of course to employ new methods of fieldwork.

Within last four years I have been working on inquiry in this new “terrain” of scientific work and I have found it necessary to grasp this problem area systematically and to develop, at least, preliminary typology of GSM technology and its use in religious life, which I would like to present in this paper. It stems from my own fieldwork, conducted in the Czech Republic, employing the methods of e-mail questionnaires, chat interviews and searching the examples.

TYPOLGY OF GSM USE IN RELIGIOUS LIFE [2]

In an attempt to look at the relation between GSM technology and religious life systematically, we can view GSM space as a basis or platform for 1) religious communication and 2) religious practice. It is necessary to be aware that the border between communication and practice is not in any case strictly bounded, because both areas can be characterized by diffusion and interaction.

COMMUNICATION USE [2.1]

Communication (not exclusively of religious content) is obviously an important, official and major use of GSM technology. It can be divided into two additional "sections" - external and internal - where the external represents the communication with those outside the religious groups and the internal use is involved with the communication within the groups. Connection between the members of religious communities and their leaders via phone calls or text messages, and the mobile contacts within individual believers, are typical feature of today's life. External communication is characterized by the public relation strategy of religious movements - it represents mainly the use of mobile phones for spreading the religious message in a form of so called GSM spam, as we shall see in examples further. Just this way of communication is an example of changeover from simple communication use to religious practice.

Another theoretical analysis offers a triadic system of division:

- 1) communication use,
- 2) organization and self-organization use,
- 3) presentation and self-presentation use. Also these elements have to be treated as inseparable parts of one complex.

ORGANIZATION AND SELF-ORGANIZATION USE [2.2]

As an example of organization use of GSM technology in religious life we can point out solicited text messages and the phenomenon of networking. Technological improvements of telephone devices allow creating different types of phone numbers directories, groups or folders, and some of them could be created just for the religious purposes in a meaning of organization. We talk about creating phone communities either for calls, text messages or chatting. Here belongs, for example, regular mass sending of SMS inviting the members to worships, biblical workshops etc. Mobile telephones offer number of sophisticated tools for creating network communities, for example sorting the items of phone lists by the relation to users; then it is possible to set up separate phone directories for family, business and religious contacts. We do not have to enumerate the tools like filtering or preferring phone numbers because the use and its impact is quite clear, but

what we can find interesting in common practice of religious communities as well as of individual believers, is the process of deleting the phone contacts. It is probably not too risky to view the procedure of deleting phone numbers of community recusants or apostates from phone lists as a "ritual" of excommunication - not only in the meaning of community but also in the meaning of communication.

As for the solicited text messages we have to point out some Internet-based organizations offering regular supply of SMS with the biblical texts. We are going to mention some of them in detail further, but now we talk about the services of guiding the individual members of religious groups in liturgical year and liturgical calendar. Here is the example: "*Sunday 26/11/06, 1. Reading: Daniel 7:13, Psalms: 93(92), 2. Reading: Revelation 1:5-8, Gospel: John 18:33-37*". One SMS of 160 characters only can bear the weekly portion of "Sunday reminder" for the member of Roman Catholic Church in order to get ready for the Sunday Mass, and also for purpose of the parish staff. The church personnel welcome this SMS service as a way of organizing the liturgy better; they view it as a shift to quality improvement of their service for believers. Creating, distributing and purchasing of this kind of mobile text messages is an example of entirely new way of religious behavior either of religious groups or individuals. We can notice an interesting fact - the restrictive policy of two from three GSM network providers in the Czech Republic, which has stopped or limited free mass sending of text messages via Internet-based SMS gates, had not much influence on this practice. It is true that some Internet servers were made to quit their activities in this field, but there is still large number of subscribers of this type of service.

PRESENTATION AND SELF-PRESENTATION USE [2.3]

As for the religious presentation we are going to mention here using the religious symbols in a form of so called MMS. Production and distribution of multi-media messages represent the latest available technological news in a domain of GSM and the accessibility of the service is still increasing. Here belongs setting up the pictures or photographs of religious symbols, as for example Christian crosses portraits of Jesus, Jewish menorahs or stars etc., as wallpapers or backgrounds of mobile phone displays. From one point of

view, this use is comparable with wearing the jewelry, bearing religious symbols and icons for the purpose of expressing the individual's belief or belonging to religious group. But from another point of view, mobile phones, and the technology they maintain, allow for example to hide these religious expressions, to select to whom they may be shown, or to archive them. Also this use is the example of interactivity with the Internet: on the World Wide Web there are number of pages offering prefabricated MMS and some of them bear religious content.

The similar situation is with mobile phone ringing, melodies, tones, alerts and alarms (simply the sounds): the choice of chants, hymns or other liturgical music, often downloaded from Internet-based menus of sound effects, can be viewed as a religious expression of individual users. But this is just a situation when the researcher has to be able to make a distinction between using the sounds with religious themes in a meaning of personal religious expression and setting up these melodies for purpose of recognizing the incoming phone calls.

EXAMPLES OF GSM USE IN RELIGIOUS LIFE [3]

MISSIONARY WORK [3.1]

Now we are going to mention some interesting examples from religious practice. As we have stated earlier we are going to focus on the phenomenon of GSM spam. Communication spam generally, described in many definitions, can be characterized simply as unsolicited information. But there is an important and much discussed question for the researches in this region of examining the religion: whether sending text messages (however excessive the sending is) for the purpose of spreading the religious ideas should be treated as a spam or not. We have to realize the spamming is a new religious manifestation, new form of religious expression and there is still the imperative of respecting the religious freedom.

Religious spam messages I have collected during my fieldwork are mostly of missionary and apocalyptic content, whereas those of apocalyptic character can be defined as a sub-group of the messages disseminated with purpose of missionary activism.

Here is the example of SMS sent anonymously via web-based gate:¹ *“Mark: Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned!! Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.”*² The message has (in Czech original version) 131 characters including spaces, whereas the limit for one SMS is 160 characters, and for the SMS sent through Internet gate it is little less, which was probably the reason for some text omissions. The author has used doubled exclamation mark in the end of the first sentence in order to make the message more urgent, while there is no exclamation mark in original biblical text, which is Mark 16:15-16 and also the chronology of the biblical verses is changed over.

Another example of missionary activity realized through mobile phones comes from local branch of Jehovah’s Witnesses, generally well known for their strong missionary drive: *“Do you know that even in this troubled world you can gain happiness from accurate Bible knowledge of God? If you would welcome further information or would like free Bible study, please dial this number...”*³ This SMS, addressed to multiple recipients, was sent from mobile telephone set off, with active service of voice messages. The text of the text message was probably conceived in accordance with the text on official promotional Jehovah’s Witnesses web site in a section *“Contact Us”*.⁴ Leaving the voice message with the postal address in voice inbox has resulted in sending of printed Biblical material edited by the Watch Tower Publishing House without any further phone contact made by the sender. The non-official standpoint of Jehovah’s Witnesses authority in the Czech Republic (contacted by SMS chat) to employing these methods of mission was strongly and repeatedly supported by the Bible citation of Romans 10:14.⁵ The text of this verse is often used for challenging the believers to carry out missionary activities.

¹ The SMS is dated 15th October 2002, it means before the beginning of year 2003, when the regulation of sending SMS via Internet interface went into effect.

² The text of original version of the SMS: *„Marek: Kdo uvěří a přijme křest, bude spasen. Kdo však neuvěří, bude odsouzen!! Jděte do světa a nezte všem lidem dobrou zprávu.“* For the translation of SMS, originally conceived in Czech language, I have used the New International Version of Bible.

³ The SMS is dated 3rd May 2005. The text of original SMS: *„Víte, že i v tomto neklidném světě můžete dosáhnout štěstí prostřednictvím správných biblických znalostí o Bohu? Pokud máte zájem o další informace nebo o studium Bible zdarma, zavolejte prosím na toto číslo...”*

⁴ <http://www.watchtower.org>

⁵ Text of the verse by the New International Version of Bible: *“How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?”*

The third example of missionary efforts is from Islam. Despite the fact this SMS was distributed in the Czech Republic, it was written in English: "Proclaim! In the name of thy Lord who createth. Surah Al-Alaq 96:1". Entire mobile text message was written in capital letters. It was sent from SMS gate, which allows the use of both upper and lower case characters and that is why we can presume it was designed with the intention of urgency, which is significant for missionary strategy.⁶

One last example of GSM spam with religious content can be described as apocalyptic: "And I beheld when he had opened the sixth seal, and, lo, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood. And the stars of heaven fell unto the earth, even as fig tree casteth her untimely figs, when she is shaken of a mighty wind. And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together; and every mountain and island were moved out of their places."⁷ The original SMS contained the accurate citations from Czech Kralic Bible, the book of Revelation 6:12-14, and the text typed without using diacritical marks (mostly not available in mobile phones) was almost incomprehensible.

DAILY INSPIRATION [3.2]

Not only spam messages present the essential part of SMS with religious subject, but also solicited text messages with "daily inspiration". On the Internet there are many servers offering the subscription of regular receiving of SMS with quotes from the Bible. One of the most popular services is called *Daily Manna* and it is available also in the Czech Republic.⁸ Here is the part of the promotional text on Daily Manna web sites: "*Daily Manna from the Net is a global service of International Bible Society providing Scriptures daily, without comment. Discover how the word of God can give light, encouragement, hope and faith.*"⁹ Many of the Czech clients of this service, contacted by

⁶ The SMS is dated 14th September 2001, few days after the events of terrorist attack on New York Twins 11th September 2001. I have found quite similar SMS, differing from the first one only by using Modern English, in the time of beginning of Iraq conflict in 2003.

⁷ The text of original version of the SMS: „I pohleděl jsem, když otevřel pečeť šestou, a aj, země třesení veliké stalo se, a slunce zčernalo, jako pytel zíněný, a měsíc všecken byl jako krev. A hvězdy nebeské padaly na zem, podobně jako dřevo fíkové smítá s sebe ovoce své, když od velikého větru kláceno bývá. A nebe se schovalo jako kniha zavřená, a všeliká hora i ostrovové z místa svého pohnuli se.“ The SMS is dated 2nd May 2005. For the translation of SMS, originally conceived in Czech language, I have used the King James Version of Bible.

⁸ <http://www.biblenet.cz>

⁹ <http://www.eurobible.net>

e-mail questionnaires (answering the question whether they find this service useful for their personal spiritual life), articulate the opinion that God can address a man via quotation from the Bible and using the server with biblical quotes is just a tool - God is not limited by the Scripture and that is why he can use the verses in a form of SMS.

TALISMANS AND MAGIC FORMULAS [3.3]

Not only in Christianity or Islam can we find interesting examples of using GSM technology in religious practice. Due to the extremely varying forms of neo-paganism the following examples from neo-pagan surroundings cannot be viewed as a common practice, but they, in any case, deserve our attention. The first example represents the popular talisman with the text "*Sator Arepo*",¹⁰ which is the anagram of familiar Latin "*Pater Noster*". Unlike in case of other neo-pagan talismans the material for creation of this talisman is not strictly ordered and that is why it could be created, sent and forwarded in a form of SMS.¹¹ The second example is the MMS with the homemade photograph of magic formula text with the name of astral entity "*Ab-raxas*" inscribed in sand.¹² The power of this magic formula consists in articulating or thinking on the name of astral being and the MMS was forwarded in a chain scheme during the neo-pagan ritual conducted in GSM space via phone conference mode.

CONCLUSION [4]

We have presented several interesting examples of using the GSM technology in religious life and it is evident that almost all components of religion (community, ritual etc.) are impacted by the technological, cultural and social change produced by the GSM boom. Instead of some ultimate statements there are few questions in conclusion of this paper. For example: what are the perspectives of GSM use in religious life? Is it, for example, the payment of membership fee in religious organizations via donor SMS? Or the pastoral work via phone calls? What are the attitudes of official religious authorities to the use of GSM technology? And what new methods of ex-

¹⁰ The text was capitalized.

¹¹ The SMS is dated 30th April 2006.

¹² The MMS is dated 16th November 2005.

aming the religion should be employed by the researches? How to solve out the problem of SMS or MMS citation, referencing and archiving? And further: is it relevant to examine the religious practice of individual believers? It is probably the only question which could be answered positively, in the intention of culture turn in study of religion. The subject of study of religion is the religion in plural. Also the religious practice is pluralistic and this plurality is permanently increasing. It means that the way how the individual believers define the religion and the religious practice must be included in the subject of exploring the religion and the scholars must review existing scientific approaches to religious research.

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