

2020 ASIS&T Asia-Pacific Regional Conference (Virtual Conference),
December 12-13, 2020, Wuhan, China

Open Access

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Place, Practice, and Flow: Information Practices in the Mahamevnawa Buddhist Monastery

<https://doi.org/10.2478/dim-2020-0049>

received August 15, 2020; accepted September 15, 2020.

Abstract: This paper presents the findings of a study exploring the information practices of members of a religious organization. Its focus is the “Mahamevnawa Buddhist Monastery.” Particularly, this paper focuses on the study’s findings in relation to participants’ information practices in constructing their understanding of “the Temple.” The study is informed by an information practices theoretical perspective, drawing on work from a variety of disciplines, including Castells’ *space of flows*, and Fisher’s *information grounds*. Data was gathered from participant observation, interviews with both monks and devotees and email follow-ups, and analysis of the online presence of the temple through its website. Five social constructs for the temple appear frequently in the interviews: *Virtual space*; *Physical/geographical place*; *Virtual space*; *Symbol*; *Process and practices*; and *Organization*. Participants’ information practices are not only limited to spiritual purposes but also are linked to various social practices, activities, and interests. The study’s findings suggest that constructions of place play a hitherto underexplored role in the multi-layered relationship between people and information.

Keywords: information practices, information flow, networked society, practice theory, information behavior, Castells

1 Introduction

This paper presents the findings of a study exploring the information practices of members of a religious organization. Its focus is the Mahamevnawa Buddhist Monastery (generally referred to by participants in the study as *the Temple*), established in Sri Lanka in 1999 which is now operating with branches in many countries, including Australia.

In adopting an information practices perspective (Savolainen, 2007), the study seeks to move beyond the implicit limitations that are prevailing in information behavior approaches to focus on the social, collective, non-purposive aspects of the ways people deal with the information and their interactions, deviating from the conceptual tradition of information behavior research, with its focus on the active information seeking behavior of individuals.

The social relationships observed in the Temple are varied. Gherardi (2008, p. 517) pointed out the importance of knowledge in sustaining complex social relationships: *To know is to be capable of participating with the requisite knowledge competence in the complex web of relationship among people material artifacts and activities*. Few studies have attempted to untangle this complex web of relationships by any means, but our study has attempted to do it using an information practices approach. Further, the conceptual starting point of Castells’s (2004) notion of information flows has provided a path for directing focus towards information practices in a setting comprising of multi-layered social relationships, by bringing together the people, their communications, and the means of communication as well as the outcomes of interactions. Sassen’s (2006) concept of globalized organization shed light on the institutional perspectives of the Mahamevnawa Temple and its workings. Fisher’s (2005) theory of Information Grounds provided a basis for interpreting face to face interactions in specific locations.

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Up to this time, these conceptual frameworks have not been linked in terms of information practice research. Analyzing them in depth can bring out their similarities, differences, and overlapping ideas, which will shed the light on Gherardi's *complex web of relationships*.

The study has shown that participants are attracted to the temple and connected to the temple for various reasons. The information practices that emerge out of these reasons are not only limited to dharma—that is, spiritual purposes—but also are linked to various social practices, activities, and interests such as food, music, celebrations, culture, careers, business connections, and friendships. These practices emerge from a range of events such as blood donations, working bees, and children's programs as well as from prayers and other religious activities, engagement with the voluntary activities of donations, and the commercial activities of producing and buying religious texts and recordings. The experiences of monks and devotees not only link individuals with the physical social group of the Temple, but also demonstrate the existence of information networks, social networks, and media networks of various interests and expertise. The findings of the study demonstrate that the information not only flows between individuals, but also within the various social groups and even between global institutions (branches of the temple and other collaborative institutions) through varied information networks. These practices are part of the everyday lives of participants, who consider what they do in this shared community to be unremarkable (Olsson, 2013) and they describe what they do in a taken-for-granted way. As a consequence, these practices are rendered "invisible" to the participants (Savolainen, 2008, p. 3), which presents a challenge for the researcher who must elaborate them in detail.

These social experiences are considered based on shared activities and to some extent a shared sense of identity has laid a good foundation for investigating the information flows of the temple with its emphasis on social context.

Thus, it is important to emphasize the significance of the setting within which these social interactions take place and the contexts within which information flows. Moreover, Moring and Lloyd (2013) argued that particular social practices are produced through social interactions within this specific setting and that it is possible to identify social conditions that fundamentally shape this setting.

The setting for this study, the MA Temple, is extremely complex. The findings indicate that the Temple exists as a permanent building, but it can be created temporarily only; it is a place for spiritual development, for friendship,

and for the maintenance of ethnic culture; it is a global business and a place for quiet contemplation; it is sustained through the skills of the monks and through information and communication technologies; its devotees see themselves as individuals and as members of overlapping networks as do the monks; the interactions of those engaged in this social setting lead not only to spiritual capital as expected from a religious setting, but also to economic capital and informational capital. Further, exercising of power can also be determined within this setting.

The paper specifically focuses on the study's findings related to participants' information practices in constructing their understanding of *the Temple*: the variety of complex and sometimes contradictory shared discursive practices that members of the community, both monks and devotees, used to describe and make sense of in terms of spiritual, social, financial, physical and virtual entities.

1.1 Background to the Temple

Mahamevnawa is both an organization and a network of temples, as well as the name of a Buddhist temple which is presently located on the outskirts of Sydney, Australia. Since the first temple was opened at Polgahawela, Sri Lanka in August 1999, the organization has expanded in all these years to 50 branches in Sri Lanka and worldwide including nine for nuns. Branches of the temple are found in many countries including Canada, France, Germany, India, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, South Korea, the United Kingdom, and the USA as well as Australia. Wherever possible, the temples have been established in the form of substantial buildings, created with the intention of maintaining ties to the extensive heritage of spiritual art in Buddhism. The founder of the temple, the Venerable Kiribathgoda Gnanananda Thero, often referred to as the Guru, was particularly determined to ensure that the Dhamma, the teachings of the Buddha, were available to people not in Pāli, the ancient language of the religion, but in language that people would find easy to understand. Thus, he has involved himself in a large translation project, apart from a publishing program through which he has written more than 80 books based on the teachings of the Buddha and compiled more than 100 books based on his own ideas and preaching. These appeal to younger people particularly. The temple organization makes great use of information and communication technologies, namely CDs and DVDs, websites, a television station, and a YouTube channel among the many approaches

used worldwide. In Sydney, the organization has recently established a large meditation center at Cattai, and makes sermons available online through their website and also continues to hold programs in the northern and western suburbs of Sydney and in Wollongong. The devotees of the temple are members of the Sri Lankan diaspora.

2 Conceptual Framework

The present study should be seen as part of the “information practice” umbrella discourse which was described by Savolainen (2007) as an emerging critical alternative to the prevailing “information behavior” discourse in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Savolainen follows Talja in suggesting that the key characteristic of this new discourse is that it represents “a more sociologically and contextually oriented line of research” which: ... shifts the focus away from the behavior, action, motives and skills of monological individuals. Instead the main attention is directed to them as members of various groups and communities that constitute the context of their mundane activities. (Savolainen, 2007, p. 120)

The study is informed by an information practices theoretical perspective grounded on the understanding that information practices research:

... requires us to understand how shared, practical understanding is derived from becoming or being embodied in context (in situ). Consequently, to know is to be capable of participating with the requisite competence in the complex web of relationships among people, material artifacts and activities ... information practices are context specific, and are entwined with a range of modalities (social, corporeal and epistemic/instrumental) (Olsson & Lloyd, 2017).

As is common in information practices research, the study’s conceptual framework is informed by work in a variety of disciplines, including Castells’ (2010) “space of flows,” and Fisher’s “information grounds” (2002) frameworks. Theories drawn from these authors have contributed to how the study understands the social, corporeal, and epistemic/instrumental modalities described by Olsson and Lloyd (2017).

Castells’ influential work, *The Network Society*, published over several years at the end of the 1990s, proposed a reconsideration of the concept of space, leading to the development of the idea of the “space of flows.” His fundamental understanding of the space of flows was stated as “the material organization of time-sharing social practices that work through flows” (1996, p. 204) and although he has modified some of his

understandings over time, this has not been changed; the space of flows allows people who are in different physical spaces to interact together at the same time.

The space of flows has three key dimensions to it, according to Castells; the first is the infrastructure that allows for communication; the second is the hubs and nodes where messages cluster and social interactions take place; and the third is the people who have the knowledge, skills, and power to take part in the exchanges in the network. The flows concern all aspects of life that can be exchanged in digital space, with an emphasis on economic and informational flows. Thus, the space of flows, the space of the Informational Society, is complex, because of the existence of a multiplicity of elements in it and the wide range of interactions among and between them.

On the other hand, the space of places is a physical location where experiences take place and this space represents the geographic spaces of everyday life. Stalder (2006) argues that Castells’ original notion that there was a sharp distinction between the space of flows and the space of places is no longer a valid one. It is no longer possible to claim that the space of flows is a place where dominant power in a society is exercised since only elites are present in the space of flows, while physical locales are the places where people with less power gathered. Castells himself (1999) acknowledges that the new society will arise not from “the separation between places and flows, but out of the interface between places and flows and between cultures and social interests, both in the space of flows and in the space of places.” Castells’ work provides one conceptual lens through which the study has explored the Mahamevnawa Buddhist Monastery: an organization and community that exists both in physical space (in Sydney, in Sri Lanka, and in regional temples around the world) but whose success is also strongly rooted in its extensive virtual presence and the online community of devotees it has developed.

Information grounds are clearly physical places, but they are more than the geographic spaces of everyday life that mark the space of places. An information ground emerges, temporarily, when people come together for a common reason and as a result create social interactions, thus leading to the sharing of information. This sharing of information is supplementary to the main purpose of being in the requisite place (Fisher, Landry, & Naumer, 2006). Conceptually, information grounds are extremely complex and the factors that comprise them are grouped into three categories: people related, place related, and information related. More importantly, the feelings experienced by different people participating in the same information ground at the same time are different.

3 Methodology

Approval for the study was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University. As one of the authors is a member of the temple community, participant recruitment was carried out at arm's length by exhibiting the required notices in meeting places and posting the notices online, inviting participation in the study. Participants in the study are referred throughout as monks or devotees, the terms that they use to refer to themselves and each other in the context of the temple.

The focus of this research is to bring out the social reality. Ethnography is a good theoretical fit for this research for understanding various social worlds from the perspectives of the community around the temple and its branches. It will provide a micro level perspective on the effects of global transformation processes of the MA temple as well as systematic insights into perceptions and strategies of local actors and their information flows. Being a member of the temple community, the interviewer was able to build better rapport with the interview participants which resulted in a better insight into the temple. This helped to look at the scenarios outside the academic boundaries and uncover hidden agendas, ideas, motives, and relationships that the temple participants have with the temple and analyze them from their own experiences. This leads to an understanding of the real meaning of those motives.

Furthermore, the research was undertaken by interviewing participants only in Australia. However, the participants are members of a diasporic community and therefore have multiple, intersecting cultural identities. The temple being a globalized organization, the monks also have served and traveled to branches all over the world.

There were 8 monks and 13 devotees among the participants and each was interviewed for approximately one hour. In addition to interviews, participant observation gave insight into the different social practices existing within the temple.

Data have been gathered through participant observation, interviews with monks and devotees, email follow-ups, and analysis of the online presence of the temple through its website. Questions for the monks focused on their work in the globalized context of the temple, their contribution to the temple as an organization, and their engagement with other monks and with devotees in the sharing of information and knowledge. Similarly, questions for devotees are designed in such a way that they explore their engagement with the temple and their contribution to it.

The questions were open-ended ones. The interview began with the primary question: **“Tell me the story about how you came to this temple?”**

We have secondary questions based on their answers such as:

- From Devotees
 - How did you hear about the temple?
 - What does temple mean to you?
 - What is your contribution to the temple, and your relationship with temple community?
- From Monks,
 - What factors have encouraged you to be a monk on this temple?
 - Your contribution as a monk serving in the temple
 - How do you work with Monks and other participants?
 - In what ways do you work with devotees and what benefits do they get from the temple?

The information regarding the conduct of interviews was advertised on the notice board of the temple. They were conducted in various places such as temple premises, temporary gatherings, the places where their events may take place temporarily, routinely, or permanently.

Interviews were conducted predominantly in English, but as the researcher conducting the interviews and the devotees had Sinhalese as their common language, there were times, especially during the discussion of spiritual practices, when Sinhalese words were used rather than its customary English translation. The interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed before analysis. During transcription, obvious errors in grammar have been corrected. The analysis of the website of the main temple organization and of the Sydney organization used the English-language version and focused on the information-based activities of the temple organization, including the publishing program, the TV station, and YouTube channel, as well as the use of technologies such as Soundcloud to communicate with devotees.

Preliminary analysis of the data was performed using both *a priori* coding drawn from Castells' and Fisher's work and emergent coding (Bryman, 2008). Emergent coding helped the coding framework to develop significantly during the analysis process. The analysis has revealed the complexity of the organization and the relationships of both monks and devotees to the organization and to each other, in relation to the importance of information technologies and physical places at the heart of these relationships.

4 Findings

Five social constructs for the temple appear frequently during interviews with monks and devotees:

- *Virtual space* — many participants described online virtual presence and active online communities as one of the defining features of *the Temple* setting, how it was distinct from more traditional Buddhist institutions and how effective this was in affording its geographically dispersed diaspora community a sense of belonging.
- *Physical/geographical place* — participants would refer to *the Temple* when talking about it as a physical place, for example when referring to the Sydney temple or the foundation temple in Polgahawela, Sri Lanka.
- *Symbol* — participants would also use *the Temple* in a symbolic way—a way of referring to the community as a whole and also a body of people with a shared set of religious beliefs.
- *Process and practices* — participants would refer to *the Temple* as a place where religious ceremonies are performed, a place where devotees can engage in and develop their understanding of spiritual practices such as meditation.
- *Organization* — many participants also considered *the Temple* as an organization in the context of managerial insight; for example, it is understood to be a financial entity with expenses, cash flow, and maintenance costs. On this level, in contrast to its more spiritual constructions, certain contexts would require the Temple to be perceived as an organizational entity, little different from a corporation or a university.

It is clear that the work of the Temple and the interactions among and between the monks and the devotees would not be possible without the internet. The temple websites indicate significant use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in carrying out the work of the temple and in communicating with monks and devotees. Use of the mobile phone to contact the monks is suggested on the website and both monks and devotees made comments on this means of communication. Technologies used in spreading the message of Buddha include the sale of digital and printed books, online webcasts, and sermons stored in Soundcloud, YouTube, and Google+, and the use of Blogspot, Facebook, Skype, and Twitter for spreading messages about temple programs as well as in the solicitation of donations.

The temple has a strong focus on money-related matters to certain extent. A number of devotees commented

on making contributions to the Temple, including through the website: *I even contributed to the temple through the internet because they have their account numbers displayed online.* Others commented on the range of books and other merchandise available for sale:

They sell Buddhist books in front of the place [when] they conduct the Sill program. So I think those funds go to improvement of fundamental facilities of the temple. So I bought plenty of books which I think would directly contribute and go to the improvement of the facilities.

These activities are in addition to the television channel and the extensive use of YouTube, as mentioned above. Devotees welcome these technologies and use them alongside real world interactions as they engage in their spiritual activities:

First we went to Live Sessions in the monastery conducted by the Ven Kiribathgoda Gnanananda Thero, our Teacher. They have books and also they have a library so we joined the library and we bought some books and CDs; subsequently, we heard he was doing his preaching on the TV, Radio most of the time in Live sessions and [recording on] Audio Cassettes, MP3s.

I got to know those programs through emails and through my friends like the community and some through leaflets.

Devotees indicated that they use a range of technologies to communicate with each other and with the monks, such as mobile phones, Skype, email, and Viber, and in the process, build friendships with other devotees. Similarly, as expected, the monks also use these technologies to communicate with monks in other locations and to create links in new communities:

We did preaching through Skype to Korea and Germany. In Germany, kids' programs are done through Skype. We hold discussions too over the phone.

The use of technology that monks described was not focused on social interaction as it was used for the devotees, but at one level was used to resolve conflicts and find answers. At an organizational level, it was used to promote the work of the temple, support decentralized decision-making, and sustain the governance processes of the temple, as it is seen as a globalized organization. *Monks are able to attend meetings through online Technology and thereby support the sales and distribution of the publications produced by the Guru.*

At the same time, place is extremely important both to the devotees and to the monks. The ways of discussing place is much greater than the ways in which the use of technology and the flows of information are discussed. It is clear that participants view the temple through different lenses because they meet in different settings,

which depend on the reasons and purposes for which such meetings are conducted. Even when they meet in the same physical location and for the same program or activity, their reasons will differ and this creates a different construct.

When monks refer to the temple, they tend to use the formal name of Mahamevnawa, which is now the formal name of the building on the outskirts of Sydney; now they use it to represent the temple as an organization, rather than the physical building. Although one devotee specifically talks in organizational terms: *I've been to the head office when I was in Sri Lanka*, devotees tend to have a much more physical sense of place:

I go to the Dharma program in Baulkham Hills [a suburb in north-western Sydney] which will be on the first Saturday of each month.

They had these functions regularly in different places close to where I lived. Some of them were in [northern suburbs of Sydney] Cherrybrook, Pennant Hills, Castle Hill, Seven Hills, Blacktown.

The temple is also conceptualized as a symbol by most devotees. On one hand, it is a representation of beliefs: *Temple is a place that represents Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha*; and *a place where I can gather merits*. On the other hand, it represents a sense of peace and tranquility: and it is a place that promotes peace of mind. A female devotee said: *as the name implies, it was an Asapuwa to me*.

This is an interesting and complex reference that harks back to traditional notions of a hermitage, a place independent from the everyday world, for example, as a forest retreat and which at the same time carries with it a vastly contemporary allusion to luxurious looking temples which are wholly different from the traditional ones. This idea of luxury is apparent in other responses from devotees, for example: *if they are building a bathroom, I mean a bath room with cement for the floor; you can put beautiful tiles on the floor*.

It is a place which helps to build trust among friends. It is also a place for action, whether religious or community based, as is evident in the following statement: Today we had a working bee program. We enjoyed it a lot. It is very nice to do such things at the temple and other places we gather.

Finally, it is a place where devotees acknowledge that information on many topics is shared. Many devotees and the monks place an emphasis on the exchange of religious ideas, and the understanding of dhamma and its practices: *If [devotees] practice Buddhism, they can experience those stages of mind. Therefore, the Devotion is*

essential. However, most devotees acknowledge that place functions as an information ground:

So we get to know about other things and information through them, which is not only related to Buddhism but also something that could be helpful for your career. The communication is very broad in that place.

This view of the place and the processes happening there is different from the view held by at least one of the monks: *we do not focus or regard it as a meeting and greeting place*. In spite of this view from one of the monks, the devotees describe a number of information grounds, including working bees, community events such as blood donation, cultural events and celebrations, and children's programs, where they use the time to socialize and to share information.

The study's findings show that even a physical place is more than simply a geographic location and its meaning and significance to members of the temple community can shift depending on the context of its use. A close analysis of the way the devotees and monks talk about the temple as a place indicates that another conceptualization of place exists for them, which is related to the permanence of the relationship between the devotees and the place where spiritual practices are held. Within this conceptualization, there are three categories namely temporary, routine, and permanent.

Temporary places are places where people meet for different events from time to time. It could be where they have social activities such as blood donations, working bee programs, and youth programs; often, however, these places are used for Dhamma preaching:

A few devotees got together and invited the monk and we first had a meeting at a house in Granville. That was where my temple was. One of my friends, who lives in Canberra has organized a one-day program and invited all his friends and neighbors to his place.

The place where monks lived was a bit too far and I could not visit the place, but they had everything in different places and managed to create the same temple atmosphere such as in community centers, clubs, and even individual devotee's houses. They used to bring huge statues and everything from the temple to these places all over the NSW and gave a marvelous, unthinkable, and unforgettable experience to the people.

Routine places are places that exist in the community and are used for other purposes most of the time. However, at a given frequency, say once a month, that geographic space becomes a part of the temple. One of the monks explained how spiritual practices are developed and established in these routine places:

In countries like this, we do it via the people. We select one person to initiate and organize Dharma programs close to their residence. He/she knows the area well and they also know the people who live close by. So, we carry out programs at the selected areas every month.

Permanent places are places that are part of the temple and utilized in the temple: I visit the monastery on Wednesday and Friday as there is a Dharma Sermon after the chanting in the evening. I also visit the temple whenever I'm free.

The study has given rise to the observation that participants are attracted to the temple and connected to it for a variety of reasons. The information practices that emerge from these reasons are not only limited to dharma — namely spiritual purposes — but are also linked to various social practices, activities, and interests such as food, music, celebrations, culture, careers, business connections, and friendships. These practices emerge from a range of events such as blood donations, working bees, and children's programs, as well as through prayers and other religious activities and engagement in the voluntary activities of donations and the commercial activities of producing and purchasing religious texts and recordings. These activities of monks and devotees not only link individuals with the physical social group of the temple, but also demonstrate the existence of information networks, social networks, and media networks consisting of various interests and aspects of expertise. The findings of the study demonstrate that information not only flows between individuals but also within various social groups having many interests and even between global institutions (branches of the temple and other collaborative institutions) through varied information networks.

These practices are part of the everyday lives of participants, who take what they do in this shared community for granted (Olsson, 2013), describing what they do in a taken-for-granted way. As a consequence, these practices are rendered "invisible" (Savolainen, 2008, p. 3) and this presents a challenge for the researcher who must elaborate them in detail. Extracting information regarding these social experiences based on shared activities, and a shared sense of identity, have to some extent laid a good foundation for investigating the information flows of the temple with its emphasis on social context.

Thus, it is important to emphasize the significance of the setting within which these social interactions take place and the contexts within which information flows. As Moring and Lloyd (2013) argue, particular social practices are produced through social interactions within this specific setting and it is possible to identify social

conditions that fundamentally shape this setting. The setting for this study, the MA Temple, is multi-layered. The findings indicate that it exists as a permanent building and it can be created temporarily; it is a place for spiritual development, friendship, and the maintenance of ethnic culture; it is a global business and a place for quiet contemplation; it is sustained through the skills of the monks and through information and communication technologies; its devotees see themselves as individuals and as members of overlapping networks as do the monks; the interactions of those engaged in this social setting lead not only to spiritual capital as expected from a religious setting, but also to economic capital and informational capital. Within this setting, exercises of power can also be determined.

Gherardi pointed out the importance of knowledge in sustaining complex social relationships:

To know is to be capable of participating with the requisite knowledge competence in the complex web of relationship among people material artifacts and activities (Gherardi 2008, p. 517)

Few studies have attempted to untangle this complex web of relationships, but our study is attempting to do so using an information practices perspective. The conceptual starting point of Castells' notion of information flows has provided a way to focus on the information practices in this setting comprising of multi-layered social relationships, by bringing together the people, their communications, and the means of communication as well as the outcomes of interactions. Fisher's notion of Information Grounds provided a basis for interpreting face to face interactions in fixed locations. Till now, these conceptual frameworks have not been linked in terms of information practices research. Analyzing them in depth can bring to light their similarities, differences, and overlapping ideas to impart clarity on Gherardi's *complex web of relationships*.

First, Fisher's (2005) research was not only limited to physical places but also incorporated online settings of information grounds such as social media settings. Chatman's "small world" (1991) and Oldenburg's (1999) "the Great Good Place" have also explored the idea of information grounds in different contexts, although without using the phrase. In terms of the temple, casual interactions and conversations take place in different social spaces of the temple e.g., the Library, Meditation halls, outdoor activities, and so on.

On the other hand, Castells investigated space and place in his work "Network Society." He states that the place is unimportant, and "networked society" has no boundaries and thus can be global (p.2737), marked by "timeless time" and "space of flows." The concept

of “space of flows” has molded the social settings interconnecting different places through different people and communities locally and globally. According to him, the “networked organization” should have, *open[ed] up unlimited horizons of creativity and communication inviting us to the exploration of new domains of experience (p1)* and they all are interconnected with physically disjointed positions held by social actors (p.412) in terms of information practices. Davies and McKenzie (2004) also argued that information practices are based on social interactions, activities in multiple locations and times, and Nicolini (2009, p. 213) stated that *relationships [enacted] in space and time* are important. However, Castells space of flows theory mostly is related to the commercial aspect of information flows. It is evident from our study that some of these online practices are not only informational, but also economic, cultural, and even spiritual.

The temple can be seen as exemplifying Castells’ concept of the *space of flows*: a virtual network whose nodes connect with one another online. The temple uses a broad range of technologies resulting in high-end production values to communicate the message of the Buddha and the special approach of this temple lies in focusing on modernity and aesthetic appeal. Many devotees first become part of the temple community online and many participants describe the temple’s virtual presence as one of the most important ways through which they engage with it. They enthusiastically use communication technologies to communicate with the monks and with each other, and value the YouTube channel and recordings of the sermons as ways to continue their spiritual development when attending a physical practice is not possible.

In addition, the temple has made sophisticated use of information technology to develop a decentralized structure where many functions are devolved to its various international branches. Monks describe the “meetings” in which they interact with monks in other temples around the world and with the main temple in Sri Lanka. They also speak of the ways in which they and their fellow monks have used the technology, especially Skype, to extend their spiritual programs into places where otherwise there would be no program.

At the same time, the temple is a specific, physical place where monks and devotees come together and where information is exchanged, both formally and informally. It acts as an information ground since this information exchange is not exclusively confined to religious practices, since the participants describe the temple as an important source of information relating to social and business opportunities. It is clear that the devotees

carry out a number of social roles when they engage in the information grounds, as Fisher, Landry, and Naumer (2006) indicated and expected. For example, the devotees perform many social roles beyond their devotional roles, including functioning as a donor (of blood and money), consumer, learner, volunteer, logistics coordinator, and parent. The devotees clearly value their engagement with the temple and the various opportunities for activities created through the information grounds. However, it would appear that some of the monks are less enthusiastic about the social practices that have evolved around some of the community-based programs. This might be of evidence that the monks are seen as members of elite found in the space of flows as argued by Castells (1996); it is the transactions prompted through the work of the temple as an organization and the monks as individuals that are important.

Castells, in his later work (2004), draws attention to the importance of considering the interface between flows and places, acknowledging that it has become very easy for people to move between place and the space of flows because of easy universal access to the internet. Here, we draw attention to the separation of place into three categories by the devotees: temporary, routine, and permanent, with a particular focus on temporary places. Castells argues for the existence of timeless time in the space of flows, where the structure of events is disrupted. In the context of the temple, for example, the posting of the sermons in the Soundcloud platform means that they can be listened to at any time or whenever needed and the opportunity to donate online means that money can flow to the temple at any time. The idea of a temporary place is also disruptive of time, as it exists today, but not tomorrow. At the same time, the use of statues and decorations convey a sense of permanence by bringing in a sense of familiarity in the context of the temple, perhaps representing in a way an infrastructure that is needed for the temple; in the same way the space of flows requires an infrastructure. Temporary uses of urban space can be experimental and innovative; they can subvert the power of authority, especially planning authority, and now people in a locality assert their power using their needs, culture, and aesthetics to create the atmosphere that successfully reflects their wishes (Henneberry, 2017, p. 6-8). When considering the case of the temple, which often creates temporary temple spaces in devotees’ homes or community halls, they are clearly innovative, and often implemented by an individual, although equally supported by the organization of the temple. Yet, as Henneberry has pointed out, it is the users of the spaces and the atmosphere they create which render a temporary

space authentic; further, without the necessary flows of information, the social practices and the culture of the temple as a spiritual organization, the temporary places of the temple would not be possible. The temporary places created by devotees of the temple are clearly disruptive of the urban environment in which they briefly exist.

Another point of tension exists within the workings of the temple itself. Whilst the purpose of the temple is grounded on spirituality, it has necessarily become involved in the creation and dissemination of both printed and online information products in order to disseminate its spiritual message. Thus, from Castells' perspective, it is an example of both informational capital and economic capital at the same time. This particular place of the temple within Buddhism is different from others due to the Guru's emphasis on using modern language and the vernacular of the countries where the temple is located. The books, CDs, online recordings, photos and so on have all become an integral part to the support and development of this particular approach to spread the messages of Buddha. Both the monks and devotees describe the importance of the wealth of information and knowledge contained in the communications of the temple and the important spiritual learning to be gained through engagement with this material. This clearly involves the creation of informational capital. At the same time, devotees, in particular, are aware of the ways in which the sale of books contributes to the economic capital of the temple, thus helping to support the monks and the work they do. Neither monks nor devotees comment or discuss on/about the grand buildings, luxurious appointments, and the ways the economic capital allow their development, although one monk discussed the cost of airline tickets involved in traveling around the branches of the temple or visiting the main temple in Sri Lanka. Castells allows for interaction between these two forms of capital. Qian and Kong (2018, p.161) assert that social changes which are attributable to modernity will bring "the secular logics of market (and) economy" into theological domains. Moreover, Asad (2003 quoted in Qian and Kong (2018)) suggests that to "make a rigid division between the sacred and the secular is surely to impoverish both." In this brief article, we can do no more than to flag this friction between the spiritual and the economic as an area that requires further elaboration.

Further, a point of contention emerges in the development of the discussion. This arises due to the differences in the cultural background and experiences of the authors. It raises questions about the usage of concepts of one culture in understanding the practices of another culture as the authors acknowledge that

there will be different interpretations resulting from the cultural assumptions they make. Castells' concepts are complex and developed nearly twenty years ago, and applying them in a Western context requires a degree of interpretation based on rigorous analysis because of the significant changes which have emerged in the relationships between flows and places in everyday life. Using these same concepts in an environment that is not Western and not secular makes the process of rigorous analysis and interpretation more challenging. The authors have adopted a reflective practice approach to the analysis process, acknowledging, discussing, and at times challenging the dimension of the differing cultural assumptions and expertise they have brought to the research.

5 Conclusion

The study demonstrates how an information practices perspective can provide a useful conceptual lens that affords information researchers new opportunities to gain insights into aspects of people's relationship with information that more traditional research discourses have not considered till date. This has allowed researchers to analyze participants' sense-making of the temple as a complex web of information practices engaging with an array of social, corporeal, and epistemic/instrumental modalities, according to Olsson & Lloyd (2017).

By bringing together an information practices perspective and the work of Manuel Castells, it has identified various anomalies in Castells' concepts of space of flows and space of places that go beyond the simple disparity existing in the hierarchy of power as discussed in the early elaborations of the concepts involved. The findings of this study suggest that the space of flows has been disruptive to social practices in the same way, and so the concept of "temporary places" is also disruptive to social practices in the urban environment, destabilizing both ideas of time and permitted use of space.

The present study has also indicated that the concept of information grounds can complement the concept of space of places through its capacity in analyzing the people to the context and the information engaged in any information ground. Although people are part of Castells' concept of space of places, they are largely undifferentiated actors with no clearly specified purpose. The work of Fisher, Landry, and Naumer (2006) provides an analytical frame that identifies the range of social roles which devotees and monks play. Future works will demonstrate how use of this frame can shed light on the

relationships between the spiritual, informational, and economic capital, as well as secular social practices.

Finally, the study has demonstrated the value an information research can bring to the discipline as a whole based on non-Western contexts. Adapting Western theoretical and methodological approaches to studying the MA Temple, the researchers have forced other researchers to question and rethink the dimension of differing cultural assumptions and expertise they brought to the research. It is our hope that other information researchers around the globe will continue to expand the cultural, conceptual, and methodological boundaries of the field.

Acknowledgments: The authors wish to thank the anonymous reviewers for their feedback.

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