

Digital Religion: An Introduction

¹Matthew N. O. Sadiku, ²Grace A. Adegoye, ³Abayomi Ajayi-Majebi and ⁴Sarhan M. Musa,

^{1,4}Roy G. Perry College of Engineering, Prairie View A&M University, Prairie View, TX, USA

²Department of Food Science, Nutrition, and Health Promotion, Mississippi State University, Starkville, MS, USA

³Department of Manufacturing Engineering, Central State University, Wilberforce, OH, USA

Abstract: The Internet and social media influence not only what we believe but also how we believe. Religion refers to a social-cultural system of designated behaviors and practices, morals, beliefs, worldviews, ethics, organizations, and other elements that relate to the supernatural and spiritual. Digital religion refers to the practice of religion in the digital world. It is the intersection between recent development in digital technologies on the one hand and contemporary religion on the other. It provides an open and unlimited arena for information, dialog, and community, for religious practitioners, the spiritually curious, and everyone in between. This paper provides an introduction on digital religion.

Keywords: Digital Technologies, Digitalization, Religion, Online Religion, Religion Online, Electronic Religion, Cyber Religion, Internet Religion, Networked Religion, Spiritual Network, Electronic Church

I. INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of digital technologies transcends all cultural, racial, religious, and age boundaries. We live in an always-connected, digital age. Digitalization has accelerated exponentially, and religious survival will depend on their ability to reshape their future. Digital technologies are at the root of a massive disruption between how previous generations relate, work, think, and worship. The ubiquity of digital technologies is one of the most significant realities the church must face. The church needs careful creativity to seek the best means of using digital technologies to communicate intelligibly and persuasively to its audience in the twenty-first century.

There is no doubt that we are going through some sort of transformation created by our digital environment. Technology is revolutionizing our relationship with religion.

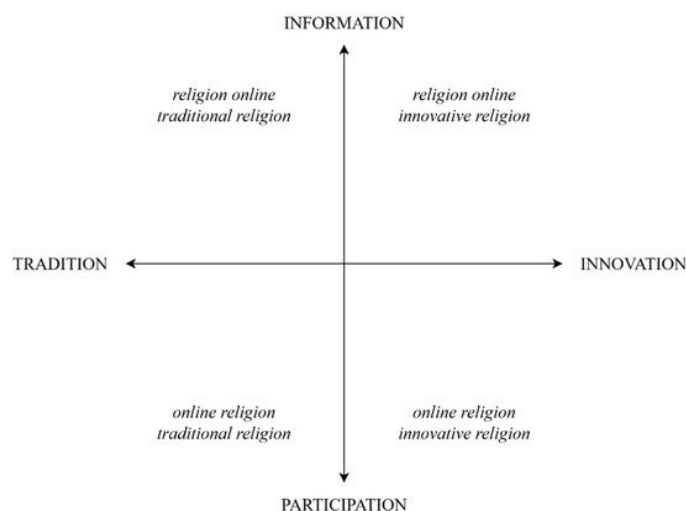


Figure 1: Four types of religious online spaces [2].

Digital technologies are changing what it means to be human. Technology and religion are no strangers to each other. When

guided by the proper motivations, ethics, and knowledge, technologies can contribute in meaningful ways to our individual and collective spiritual development. Preserving human spirituality will require putting to good use the emerging digital technologies [1].

Today, more and more human activities are organized as networks, freed from territorial restraints, with the Internet as a major tool for shaping the networks. It is hard to separate online and offline activities. In the same way, online and offline religious spaces have become blended or blurred. As shown in Figure 1, one can distinguish four types of religious online spaces [2]: (1) *religion online*, (2) *online religion*, (3) *traditional religion*, and (4) *innovative religion*.

The modern age has been characterized as the age in which the sacred has been abolished. The regime under which any religion functions in contemporary Western democratic societies is freedom of faith. Freedom of faith means that one is free to believe what they choose to believe and that all are free to organize their personal and private lives according to these beliefs. Commitment to one religious faith is a sovereign, private choice that cannot be dictated by any public authority [3]. Freedom of religion is a fundamental human right. It implied that every human being has the right to have to adopt a religion and convert to another religion or belief.

II. TRADITIONAL RELIGION

Religion is often regarded as a certain set of rituals. It has come to be widely understood as embodied practices that cultivate relations among people, places, and non-human forces such as nature, spirits, ancestors, saints, and gods. Religion is an institutionalized body of believers who accept a common set of beliefs, practices, and rituals. It is based on dogma and what you must believe. It incorporates spiritual consciousness into a system of belief, worship, morality, and social responsibility. Religion has been defined as beliefs or practices that express spirituality, while spirituality is the intrapersonal experience of the divine. It aims to transcend fallen human nature, illusion, and evil. Religious life may consist of church, synagogue, or mosque attendance and observance of rituals such as baptisms, weddings, and funerals [4]. At least seven billion of the world's nearly eight billion people today subscribe to some form of religion, compared to only about 500 million atheists. Clearly, religious belief has enjoyed staying power in human history. Most of the world believes in a religion, and popular world religions include Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Christianity is the largest world religion. Here we consider only our native religion, Christianity, and Islam.

Native Religion: Religion suffuses the whole lives of indigenous communities. Every native tribe in the US incorporates different values, traditions, and teachings into their own unique religious beliefs. The native religion has no name, but it is part of the lives of the natives. Common forms

of traditions between tribes include ceremonial dances, tribal gatherings, and sacrifices of goods are most prominent. Native American traditionalists frequently associate religion with a rigidly organized orthodoxy and orthopraxy anchored by sacred scriptures. They use the term “spirituality” to refer to their sacred belief systems, related practices, and cultural patterns, which extend far into the past, embody the present, and project into the future. American Indian traditionalists believe that the values, knowledge, narrative traditions, and ritual worlds they are taught are vital to the survival of their human and other-than-human communities. They believe that ceremonial work and traditional knowledge are authentic and potent only when conducted in their native languages. Yet most of these languages are eroding rapidly among persons under age 40 or digital natives partly due to the conditions of modern economic life. Today native American religious life continues as a viable and ongoing tradition of religious thought and practice. Many native American youths show a strong interest in traditional knowledge and religion. Ceremonial initiation into adulthood is widely practiced for both males and females. The cure of disease is entrusted to priests, who may personally be endowed with magic powers. The *shaman* is a religious specialist who holds a prominent place in society. He controls the passage of the soul out of and back into the body [5,6].

Christian Religion: Christianity is all about maintaining a relationship with our Maker. The Bible is a book about a King and a Kingdom. God’s kingdom here on earth is a spiritual realm, where he reigns in the hearts and lives of those that have accepted His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. God invites every man or woman to His Kingdom. The kingdom of God is the only message that Jesus preached. Jesus said, “I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also because that is why I was sent” (Luke 4:43). Jesus exercised the authority of God’s kingdom by casting out demons, healing the sick, raising the dead, and feeding the crowd. Jesus went around doing good (Acts 10:38). Jesus taught that the kingdom should be the primary concern of life (Luke 12:22-31). The Church has regular habits and practices designed to help people worship. These practices include prayer, fasting, Scripture reading, Sabbath observance, gathering every Sunday, baptism, etc.

Jesus came to the world to share in the life of ordinary people, to experience their daily struggle for survival. By immersing themselves in a digital world, church leaders share the gospel with digital natives, just as Jesus had done in his earthly life. Current pastors or church leaders who are mostly digital immigrants must endeavor to catch up with the digital natives. The church must discover new tools to reach and meet the needs of youths who are raised in the present generation that is predominately marked by the evasive digital culture. To relate with the youths and get along with mutual understanding, church leaders must enter their world, learn their language, cope with their fast-changing vocabulary, and engage them in a meaningful and respectful dialog. To work effectively with digital natives, they will find social networking an invaluable outreach tool [7].

Islamic Religion: Islam is a major world religion founded by Muhammad in Arabia in the early 7th century CE. Muslims regard the Prophet Muhammad as the last messenger of God, who brought the sacred scripture, the Quran, which contains God’s revelations to Muhammad. The religious obligations of all Muslims worldwide are summed up in the Five Pillars of Islam [8]:

- Believe in Allah and his holy prophet Mohammed.
- Pray five times daily.
- Fast in the month of Ramadan.
- Give alms to the poor.
- Go on a holy pilgrimage to Mecca if one can afford it.

Muslims believe that if they carefully observe these principles, they will get to heaven. The call to prayer reminds every Muslim five times a day to make their prayers to God [9]. Figure 2 shows a group of women praying together [10].



Figure 2 A group of women praying together [10].

A new generation of social media influencers has emerged in the Muslim communities. Social media has become an essential part of digital native ways of life. It is recognized that digital media has provided opportunities for young people to access global information, educational resources, social media, and social networking between friends. Social media has been employed by Muslim clerics for parenting digital natives. Muslim clerics are people who master the religious sciences, such as the science of the Quran and the science of hadith. Muslim clerics apply role model parenting by giving motivation and employing a 1+1 model, i.e., one hour of studying or reciting the Quran, one hour for activating social media, and made a friendly control for children's online activities. The result is that Muslim digital natives actively use social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and Youtube [11]. Social media influencers are challenging traditional Islamic authorities as they reimagine Muslim identities based on a new global lifestyle.

III. DIGITALIZATION OF RELIGION

Religion is often perceived as a conservative system, based on the principle of preserving an unchanging tradition. With the advent of the digital age, however, religion has been transformed. Contemporary digital culture has disrupted the traditional practice of religion and the manner in which religion is communicated, consumed, shared, and engaged.

The digital world is inevitable to the church. It has been noticed that it is difficult for the church to catch up with the pervasiveness of technology. Pastors will find themselves having little or no impact on the lives of digital natives if they continue to avoid social networking sites, where digital natives spend most of their time. If pastors want to have more influence and impact digital natives, they must embrace the social networking world of the digital natives.

There is a noticeable fading of the impact of Christian culture in Western nations. The church and the gospel are having less and less impact on daily life with regard to their message. The church is called to be salt, light, and leaven to the world

(Matthew 5:13-16). The Kingdom movement is at the service of society at large. Even Jesus' mission was not a self-proclamation of his own interests but that of God's interest and God's Kingdom. The church is the sacrament of intimate union with God and the unity of all humankind. Realizing that "all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made" (John 1:3), the mission today has to be open to all religious traditions and cultures.

Digital technologies today pervade and shape lived religions and spiritualities in multifarious ways. They influence the ways in which religion and spirituality are performed and lived in contemporary digitalized societies. They lead to the decentralization and democratization of religious and spiritual information [12]. Digital religion is not just about having religion on digital media, rather it is a blending of all aspects of religion with all of the elements we associate with a digital society. Digital religion is invariably known as online religion, cyber religion, or networked religion [13]. Online religion is colonized by an "electronic church" industry is dominated by religious media conglomerates through whom Americans are most likely to engage in digital religion.

The four discourses that characterize the relationship between religion and the digital world are shown in Figure 3 [14].

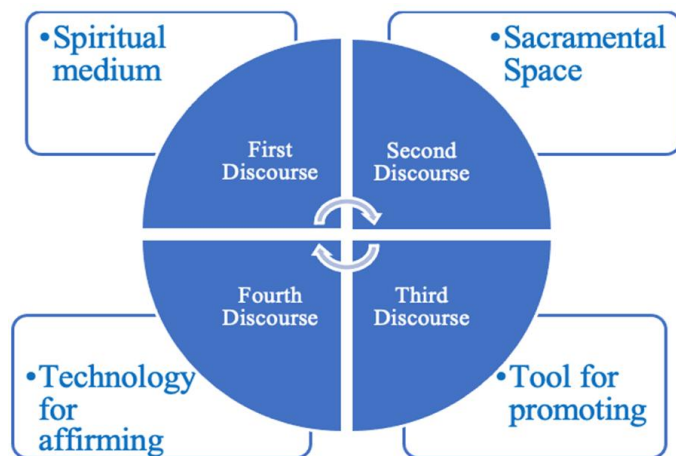


Figure 3 The four discourses that characterize the relationship between religion and the digital world [14].

IV. WHAT DIGITAL RELIGION OFFERS

More and more clergymen are using the Internet. They use the Internet to research, document, report, and testify about their experiences. Some of them believe that the Internet is a tool given by God, and therefore it can be used to reach the faithful. Digital religion spaces engage with people in their congregations. Some use technology to hold Bible studies, worship services, and a Christian dating tool. The most common types of online religious activities include religious information online, online worship in cyber churches, online worship/rituals (such as e-prayer and virtual pilgrimages), online missionary activities, and religious online communities. The common ways digital religion is being practiced include the following.

A. Online Worship: Most churches continue their ministry online to encourage faith formation and strengthen families. Online religious participation has become part of individuals' and communities' "lived religion." Online Christian pastoral ministry and spiritual guidance are executed through e-mails and in chatrooms.

B. Digital Faith: The church increases the faith of children, youths, and adults by providing weekly Bible studies that

engage them in connecting world events with the Bible, faith, and everyday life. It also presents essential practices for a Christian way of life: caring for the needy, celebrating life, discernment, eating well, forgiving, keeping the sabbath, managing household life, praying, reading the Bible, and transforming the world.

C. Hope During Pandemic: As typically shown in Figure 4, the pandemic compelled many religious people to turn to social networks to share their faith with other believers [15]. People use social media, blogs, podcasts, forums, and other digital technologies to support, adapt and strengthen their religious experience in the age of Covid-19. Religions groups took refuge online to maintain a connection with their followers. Due to the outbreak of the coronavirus, the Vatican and Saudi authorities used digital technologies to reach a wider audience.

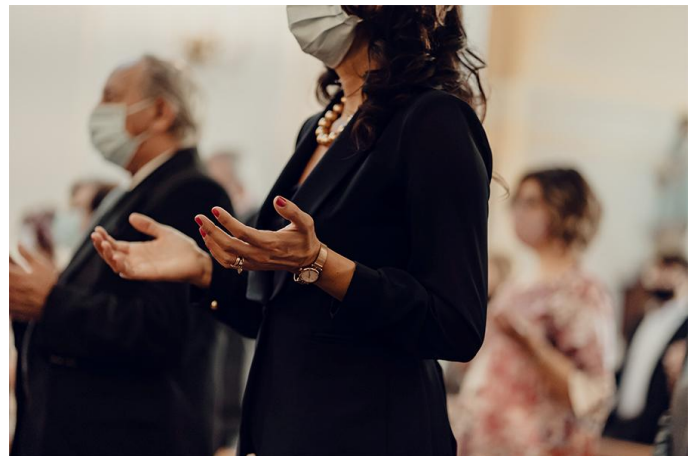


Figure 4: The pandemic compelled many religious people to turn to social networks to share their faith [15].

D. Digital Media: This is the intersection of digital media and religion. As the Internet has become embedded in our lives, digital media increasingly inform the practice of religion. Social media offer new opportunities for states, civil society, and religious communities to strengthen and perceive human rights, and to eliminate societal discrimination on religious grounds. Social media practices have been integrated into digital religion [16]. Today, the functions of religions are performed by the Internet and social networks. In a social network, a person defines his own image and determines his virtual existence to be sinful or righteous. The influence of social media on a person's life sometimes exceeds the influence of religion or society.

E. Digital Games: Religion has long had a place in digital games. The games address themes of religion through the presence of deities, cults, and/or strict codes of morality. They portray religion as a moving force of change. Some religious studies scholars have noted that videogames offer an interesting space to explore religious themes [17].

F. Digital Natives: In the digital age, youths seem to be constantly connected to the Internet via social media and mobile devices. Technology has been integrated into their life since childhood, providing them with the skills to naturally adapt to the digital world. It is no surprise that they increasingly turn to digital media to seek an answer to their spiritual questions. Although the digital natives (or millennials) are significantly less religious than any preceding generation, some of them are practicing digital religion. They are not exclusively tied to in-person religious activities and

socialization. There are different types of digital religious practices among young adults in the US [18].

V. BENEFITS

Many scholars in anthropology, theology, sociology, and psychology have realized the human need for sense and purpose. One way to meet this need is through religious or spiritual thought and practice. The Internet has provided religious people with new ways to explore religious beliefs and experiences. Most Americans do not see any conflict between their religious beliefs and their digital devices.

Some religions are particularly good at taking advantage of the opportunities that digital technologies offer. Mormonism is a good example. Having access to the Internet and using its resources, a person can find comfort, advice, and psychotherapeutic support. One can get derive benefits by leading a certain lifestyle in the social and digital world. People actively share their lives, their hobbies, their thoughts, their faces, and their lives [19].

VI. CHALLENGES

The Internet presents researchers with a moving target. It is full of so-called parody religions or fake cults, which may be regarded as fake cults and can be seen as a kind of new religious movement. Although the Internet and social media facilitate the exchange and dissemination of information throughout the world, social media can be misused to spread prejudices, and hate propaganda based on religious arguments. Within a given traditional religion, not all agree on the role of the Internet. The conceptual distinction between religion and spirituality has not gone unchallenged. Some potential challenges arise due to the blurring between online-offline religious practices and contexts of digital technologies.

Trust in technology and faith in its power can quickly become idolatry. Secularization may undermine the Christian institutions, dogmas, ethics, and rituals. Billionaire televangelists announce that they now accept Bitcoin and Paypal.

CONCLUSION

Digital technologies are increasingly making their way into religious practices worldwide. They are influencing how we practice religion. More than half of the world's population is now using the Internet and social media. Religion in all its forms is transferring and blending with the digital world. Digital religion is an intermingling of our modern mediated society with contemporary religious beliefs and practices.

Digital religion deals with the influence religion and new media have upon one another. The digitalization of religion transforms the way we practice, experience, and reshape our faiths. Religion, though transcendental, has now also become digital. It is changed by this spread and appropriation of religion through digital media. More information about digital security can be found in the books in [20-38] and the following related journals:

- *Religion*
- *Religions*
- *Religion Digital*
- *Journal of Law and Religion*
- *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*
- *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture*

References

- [1] M. N. O. Sadiku, U. C. Chukwu, A. Ajayi-Majeji, and S. M. Musa, "Digital natives and religion," *International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development*, vol. 6, no. 3, March-April 2022, pp. 946-951.
- [2] P. Siuda, "Mapping digital religion: Exploring the need for new typologies," *Religions*, vol. 12, no. 6, 2021.
- [3] H. A. Campbell and L. Connelly, "Religion and digital media," <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/9781118660072.ch25>
- [4] M. N. O. Sadiku, A. Omotoso, and S. M. Musa, "Toward better understanding of spiritual intelligence," *International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development*, vol. 4, no. 4, June 2020, pp. 1113-1115.
- [5] Native American religions," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Native-American-religion/South-America>
- [6] "Native American religion," <https://www.legendsofamerica.com/na-religion/>
- [7] J. Y. Tan, "Ministry meets social networking connecting with the digital natives," *Bulletin*, vol. 45, no. 9/10, September-October, 2013.
- [8] M. N. O. Sadiku, *Radical Christian Living: By Kingdom's Principles*. Bronx, NY: Triumph Publishing, 2020, p. 27.
- [9] "Islam summary," <https://www.britannica.com/summary/Islam#:~:text=The%20religious%20obligations%20of%20all,of%20life%20commanded%20by%20God.>
- [10] L. Pond, "Lived religion in the digital age," <https://religioussounds.osu.edu/blog/129>
- [11] S. Z. Bin-Tahir et al., "The social media use for digital natives: Parenting model of Muslim cleric families," *International Journal of Scientific & Technology Research*, vol. 8, no. 11, November 2019, pp. 2871-2874.
- [12] B. Rahme, "Digital religion, the supermarket, and the commons," *Dans Societies*, vol. 1, 2018, pp. 73-86.
- [13] C. Helland, "Digital religion," in D. Yamane (ed.), *Handbook of Religion and Society*. Springer, 2016, pp. 177-196.
- [14] J. M. Barreau, "Study of the changing relationship between religion and the digital continent—in the context of a COVID-19 Pandemic," *Religion*, vol. 12, 2021.
- [15] "From the metaverse to NFTs, how the world of religion is embracing digital technology," May 2022, <https://www.forbesindia.com/article/lives/from-the-metaverse-to-nfts-how-the-world-of-religion-is-embracing-digital-technology/76143/1>
- [16] M. Ward, "Digital religion and media economics: Concentration and convergence in the electronic Church," *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture*, April 2018.
- [17] R. C. Thames, "Religion in digital games," *Multiperspective and Interdisciplinary Approaches*, vol. 5, 2014.
- [18] S. Wilkins-Laflamme, "Digital religion among U.S. and Canadian millennial adults," *Review of Religious Research*, vol. 64, 2022, pp. 225-248.

- [19] "Digital is a religion," November 2018, <https://uxdesign.cc/digital-is-a-religion-d75b15e14872>
- [20] P. H. Cheong et al., *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture: Perspectives, Practices, and Futures*. Peter Lang, vol. 7800, 2012.
- [21] O. Steffen et al., *Playing With Religion in Digital Games*. Indiana University Press, 2014.
- [22] K. Rountree (ed.), *Contemporary Pagan and Native Faith Movements in Europe: Colonialist and Nationalist Impulses*. Berghahn Publications, 2018.
- [23] S. Han and K. M. Nasir, *Digital Culture and Religion in Asia*. Routledge, 2015.
- [24] S. Cheruvallil-Contractor and S. Shakkour (eds.), *Digital Methodologies in The Sociology of Religion*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015.
- [25] K. Radde-Antweiler and X. Zeiler (eds.), *Mediatized Religion in Asia: Studies on Digital Media and Religion*. Routledge, 2018.
- [26] M. Moberg and S. Sjö (eds.), *Digital Media, Young Adults, and Religion: An International Perspective*. Routledge, 2020.
- [27] D. Yamane (ed.), *Handbook of Religion and Society*. Springer, 2016.
- [28] H. A. Campbell and G. Stephen, *Networked theology (engaging culture): Negotiating faith in digital culture*. Baker Academic, 2016.
- [29] H. A. Campbell, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*. London, UK: Routledge, 2012.
- [30] H. A. Campbell and R. Tsuria, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*. Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2021.
- [31] V. Deloria, *God is Red: A Native View of Religion, 30th Anniversary Edition*. Fulcrum Publishing; Thirtieth Edition, 2003.
- [32] A. Possamai-Inesedy and A. Nixon (eds.), *The Digital Social: Religion and Belief*. Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG, vol. 69, 2019.
- [33] A. E. Grant et al. (eds.), *Religion Online: How Digital Technology is Changing the Way We Worship and Pray*. Praeger, 2 volumes, 2019.
- [34] G. Faimau and W. O. Lesitaokana (eds.), *New Media and the Mediatization of Religion: An African Perspective*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018.
- [35] S. J. Sten (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Religions in America*. Cambridge University Press, 3 volumes, 2012.
- [36] M. Moberg and S. Sjö (eds.), *Digital Media, Young Adults, and Religion: An International Perspective*. New York: Routledge, 2020.
- [37] L. Sullivan (ed.), *Native Religions and Cultures of North America: Anthropology of the Sacred*. Continuum, 2203.
- [38] S. C. O'Brien, *Religion and Culture in Native America: Religion and Culture in Native America*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2020.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Matthew N. O. Sadiku is a professor emeritus in the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering at Prairie View A&M University, Prairie View, Texas. He is the author of several books and papers. His areas of research interest include computational electromagnetics and computer networks. He is a Life Fellow of IEEE.

Grace A. Adegoye is a public health researcher. She bagged a Ph.D. in Nutrition from the Department of Food Science, Nutrition, and Health Promotion, Mississippi State University, a Doctor of Divinity from GraceLife University, and a Master's in Environmental Health from Mississippi Valley State University. Her areas of research interest are climate/environment, health, agriculture, and improved nutrition.

Abayomi Ajayi-Majebi is a professor in the Department of Manufacturing Engineering at Central State University in Wilberforce, Ohio. In 2015 he was honored by the White House as a Champion of Change for his significant contributions to the engineering education of minority students. He is a senior member of both the Society of Manufacturing Engineers and the American Society for Quality.

Sarhan M. Musa is a professor in the Department Electrical and Computer Engineering at Prairie View A&M University, Texas. He has been the director of Prairie View Networking Academy, Texas, since 2004. He is an LTD Sprint and Boeing Welliver Fellow. His areas of research interest include computational electromagnetics and computer networks.