Researching Religion on the WWW: Identifying an Object of Study for Hinduism

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Abstract

As a result of the increasing importance of the Internet, it is imperative that social researchers subject online phenomena to investigation and analysis. However, online methodology is largely in its infancy which means that researchers are, as yet, ill-equipped to approach this important task. In this article – focusing upon researching religion online – I outline problems regarding researching the WWW and put forward one way of identifying an object of study which can then be subjected to further analysis. Hinduism on the WWW is used as an example, and the discussion of my methodological approach applied to this area demonstrates that the identification of the object of study is actually bound up with the processes that occur online. This means that details of the area under investigation are revealed and that preliminary analysis of the situation can occur at the same time that the object of study is being identified. After this demonstration I challenge the claim that because the WWW is constantly changing, online research can only constitute a snapshot in time, and conclude the article with a plea to other researchers to share their methodological approaches to researching online phenomena in order that effective online research methods will be able to be developed.

Keywords: Religion on the WWW; Hinduism; Online methodology.

Introduction

In this article I consider problems surrounding researching the World Wide Web (WWW) and suggest one way in which an object of study can be obtained in order to study religion on the WWW – in this case Hinduism. The focus is upon Hinduism because the analysis of the online situation was an essential part of a larger research project that I conducted which examined the relationship between Hinduism and the Internet.

For the study of online phenomena to proceed effectively, an object of study must be identified using methods that are rigorous and which have a clear rationale behind their use. Using unsystematically selected data as the basis for analysis – which means both that the validity of what is being studied is left unclear and that replication in the future is difficult – is insufficient. A rigorous research design is of paramount importance because not only is the online situation important in itself, but the online and the offline are not constitutive of a duality and processes that occur in the traditional ‘offline world’ affect the online situation and vice versa.

This is becoming more significant as a result of increasing use of the Internet and leads Barker to remark that ‘any student of religion – or, indeed, of contemporary society – will ignore [the Internet] at his or her peril’ (Barker 2005: 81). Echoing this, Flory claims that religion on the WWW is ‘here to stay [and therefore] scholars of religion…had better take that reality seriously as it will undoubtedly change both the practice of
“real-world” religion and our approaches to it’ (Flory 2005: 365). Bunt makes a similar point and concludes that ‘over time it is anticipated that the Internet will form an integral component of conventional fieldwork’ (Bunt 2003: 209).

It is therefore clear that effective online research methods – which are still in their infancy (Wakeford 2004: 34, Hine 2005a: 1) – need to be developed. Concerning the study of religion online this is perhaps especially important because Dawson, one of the prominent scholars in the field, notes that ‘I know of no efforts to systematically gauge the degree of real religious interactivity happening online’ (Dawson 2005: 30). It is my hope that the process that I outline in order to enable an area of the WWW to be researched will encourage others to share their experiences of researching the WWW and that my methods will be able to be improved and built upon – a crucial undertaking in the light of the above comments.

Because my study upon which this article is based included a general investigation of the relationship between religion and the Internet, the initial discussion that I offer regarding researching the WWW references a number of studies that were concerned with researching religion online. However, the main points that I make also have generalisability to researching other areas on the WWW and are not just restricted to religion. Similarly, in my explanation of the process that I undertook in order to identify an object of study for Hinduism on the WWW, it should be appreciated that the process can be used to study the online presence of any religion. The discussion which then follows regarding the object of study provides a clear example that the process can be highly beneficial in that it can both tell us a great deal about the subject under consideration and can provide the starting point for further analysis.

**Online methodology: problems**

**Volume of websites**

One significant problem in researching the WWW is the sheer number of websites (for example, performing a Google search on 29 March, 2007 using the search term ‘Hinduism’ resulted in 9,480,000 results^3) which means that it is impossible for a single researcher to investigate even a significant proportion of them (see Bunt [2003: 7]; Dawson [2005: 15] and Apolito [2005: 14]). It is also not possible to gain a fully representative sample because the amount of websites is growing at such a rate that search engines are unable to keep track of them. Dreyfus noted in 2001 that the WWW was growing at a rate of at least a million pages a day (Dreyfus 2001: 8) and he quotes a New York Times article from 2000 which states that ‘There are now more than one billion Web pages and, according to some experts’ calculations, the number has been doubling once every eight months’ (Dreyfus 2001: 96). Therefore, when a search engine is used, the results that it produces omit many websites. In fact, according to Dreyfus, it is estimated that search engines ‘can recall at most 2 per cent of the relevant sites’ (Dreyfus 2001: 23) and that those in the search engine industry believe that ‘‘30 per cent is all one can hope for’’ (Dreyfus 2001: 25).

**Website boundaries and related issues**

What actually constitutes a website and a webpage is also an issue that needs to be addressed in order to carry out empirical research. According to Buckley and Clarke, the term ‘website’ refers to ‘a collection of related documents’ on the WWW and can be contrasted with the term ‘webpage’ which refers to ‘a single document’ (Buckley and Clarke 2004: 530). The ‘homepage’ is the main webpage of a website. Although these terms appear straightforward, an empirical study highlights a number of problems with these definitions. Although a
website is indeed a collection of related documents, for practical purposes its homepage can helpfully be used to refer to the website as a whole. Thus, for example, marketleap.com is technically a homepage but also refers to the overall website which incorporates other webpages such as marketleap.com/linkpopularity. In addition to this, some webpages within websites are, effectively, homepages of other distinct sections and because of this; these webpages should also be referred to as websites. For example, religioustolerance.org/hinduism is classified in my study as a website even though technically it is part of the larger religioustolerance.org.

Although problems of definition can be overcome, there are still other issues that need to be considered. One problem concerns the boundaries of websites. This is because of the interconnected nature of the WWW which means that websites are fluid to an extent. For example, a website will almost always contain links to websites of other organisations and/or individuals and therefore it is not always clear where one website ends and another begins. However, the homepage of a website can be identified and the general nucleus of the website can then be ascertained. Furthermore, I believe that in general, it is possible to identify the boundaries of websites if they are analysed carefully. Indeed, such an investigation is an important part of research and can give an indication of links between different organisations. Other related problems are identified by Bowie. In her consideration of hypertext (image or text that facilitates navigation to other webpages), amongst other things, she identifies ‘getting lost in the links’ and the ‘possibility of missing information’ as being problematic (cited in Nayar 2004: 115). Again, careful research can minimize such problems but the sheer size of some websites does mean that the possibility of missing information is always a danger.

Identification of those responsible for websites

A further research problem concerns the identification of who is responsible for a website as this is not always made explicit. However, unless the website is particularly obscure, it is usually possible to identify who is behind it. Indeed, in many cases those behind websites wish to make themselves known in order to further their interests. In some cases though, the situation is not so cut and dried, and organisations may wish not to make explicit their ideological position and have specific reasons for this. As in the case of the identification of website boundaries, this difficulty is not really a methodological problem as such, as the intention of organisations not to make explicit their ideology or links with other organisations is of sociological interest in itself.

Innovative multiple methods

As online research methods are undeveloped and non-standardised, it is left up to the researcher to devise a research strategy which she or he feels will give rise to productive research. Examples where new and different methods used to research online phenomena are revealed in sociological studies of religion and the Internet include Mayer (2000), Campbell, H. (2004), Campbell, R.A. (2004), Dawson and Hennebry (2004), Helland (2004) and Hojsigaard (2005). Such studies can be distinguished from studies of religion and the Internet which do not attempt to formulate or use rigorous methods when researching the contents of the WWW such as those by Beckerlegge (2001), Bunt (2003; 2004), Brasher (2004) and Apolito (2005) (which still contribute to our knowledge of issues surrounding religion and the Internet).

What is apparent from the first set of studies is that the respective researchers have had to be creative in formulating their research methods and there are wide differences between the various methodological approaches. However, in his review of Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet (from which all of the 2004 studies in the first list are taken), Flory (2005) argues that the lack of a unified methodological approach
is one of the volume’s shortcomings and notes that there is no mention of methodology in the editors’ introductory essay. Furthermore, he argues that methodological statements are generally inadequate in the subsequent chapters (Flory 2005: 364-365). However, the methodological statements provided in the studies that I have selected are actually far more comprehensive than in many others. This is not to say, though, that there should not be an improvement in this respect. Furthermore, the fact that these studies are criticised for their methodology despite the fact that they are better than others in this respect emphasises that methodological issues need to be considered further. Therefore, I fully agree with Flory’s assertion that much work needs to be done concerning online methodology, although I am unconvinced when he says that ‘a systematic methodological approach is necessary’ (Flory 2005: 364 [my emphasis]).

Because of the diversity of studies of religion and the Internet, I believe that different methodological approaches to researching the WWW are desirable and there is little to be gained in any attempt to achieve a unified methodological approach. Højsgaard and Warburg highlight the diversity of the methodological approaches featured in their 2005 edited volume concerning religion and the Internet and agree with my view that multiple methodologies are desirable and necessary (Højsgaard and Warburg 2005: 8-9). Hine also advocates multiple methodologies when she notes that diverse research methods are needed. In the introduction to her edited volume dealing with online methodology, she notes that the respective authors in the book were involved in ‘working out a situated response to the research question they wished to address, appropriate to the conditions which they found in context’ (Hine 2005a: 1) and stresses the need for ‘innovation’ in formulating online research methods (Hine 2005a: 9; see also 2005b: 109). Jankowski and van Selm also advocate ‘multiple methods’ (Jankowski and van Selm 2005: 206), as does Guimarães Jr. (2005: 141).

The need to formulate suitable research methods provides a good challenge not only to the researcher, but also to the consumer of the research. If the rationale behind the research methods which are considered to be productive by the researcher is made explicit, the audience can decide whether these methods are largely unproblematic and productive. When this occurs, all carefully thought out research methods, even if they are not perfect, are likely to contribute to more coherent ways of researching the online situation in the future. Different types of research methods can be built up and drawn upon, albeit with constant modification. Hine also makes this point when speaking about the studies in her afore-mentioned edited volume (Hine 2005a: 1-2). Importantly, rather than adapting conventional methods which may be ill-suited to researching the WWW, new methods which suit the online situation need to be formulated by researchers. Sanders reaches a similar conclusion to this and asserts that: ‘transferring a methodological procedure from a traditional context to the virtual environment is not necessarily effective’ (Sanders 2005: 73), although Hine warns that not all conventional research methods should be jettisoned (Hine 2005a: 2).

The methodological approach used to investigate Hinduism on the WWW

As has been emphasised, in my quest to find out just what was on the WWW concerning Hinduism, there were no established research methods that I could utilise. Instead, it was necessary to design a new way to conduct the investigation. Again it should be emphasised here that the main obstacle is the vast number of relevant websites. Despite this, as I will demonstrate, I am able to identify an object of study which allows a sociological investigation to proceed in a number of different ways.

My approach is unusual in that, in the light of the problems regarding the number of websites, I decided that the most productive starting point would be to initially adopt an empathetic position and consider what a
general seeker might encounter when searching the WWW for ‘Hindu-related websites’. Furthermore, the approach goes beyond methodology as traditionally conceived and is inherently tied up with the processes and dynamics that actually produce the WWW (this type of methodology is mentioned by Hine [2005b: 111] and is discussed and utilised by Beaulieu [2005] and Park and Thelwall [2005]). Because of this, in addition to merely identifying an object of study, the approach allows a number of important aspects of it to be discovered and subjected to analysis at the same time. This will be demonstrated in due course.

Beginning with the assumption, backed up by research, that a general seeker would likely start by typing ‘Hinduism’ into a search engine (Helland reports that according to the GVU 10th WWW User survey; ‘most persons find the web sites they are looking for by linking through from one site to another by using a search engine’ [Helland 2002: 299]), I did this myself on two occasions approximately one year apart using a number of different search engines. With the help of mapping software, I then followed the links from the ‘prominent websites’ (a term which will be explained below) in the top ten of the search engine rankings to other websites. All of these websites (and their links) constitute the object of study – which I refer to as ‘the general area of Hinduism on the WWW’ – that can then be subjected to analysis. For example, the websites, the organisations/individuals behind them, and the links between websites, can all be considered, as can the differences between the results from the two searches.

The general area of Hinduism on the WWW

The prominent websites which give rise to the general area of Hinduism on the WWW are the key to an analysis. Not only are they encountered when searching for Hinduism using a search engine, but they are also important because their prominence is such that they are continually encountered when searching the WWW for Hindu-related websites. The links between websites are extremely important in this respect. Aside from the number of links which can affect a website’s search engine ranking, it is also important to note that the actual links between websites are highly significant. One reason why this is the case is that links from prominent websites, where they extend to other websites not belonging to the same organisation, are often to the other websites which are also prominent. Therefore, because linkages are related to search engine rankings, this results in a positive feedback system whereby prominent websites become even more prominent. This contributes to the situation whereby there are a relatively small number of organisations/individuals that have prominent websites.

Furthermore, when the prominent websites link to websites that are not prominent, they tend to link to websites which approach Hinduism from a similar viewpoint. In addition to this, links from ‘objective’ organisations (such as the BBC) often lead to websites of those organisations that are prominent on the WWW and this not only increases the credibility of a website, but can also actually help in its search engine ranking. For example, keyword relevance is not the only criterion used by the popular Google search engine in order to rank websites. According to Google, in addition to text analysis, a major way to determine the value of a website is through the number of links there are to the website. However, Google staff also analyse the websites which offer links and assign them a level of importance. Therefore, a link from a BBC website is considered to be more significant than a link from an obscure website and this contributes to the website appearing higher up in the Google search engine rankings. This also means that if an organisation or individual creates a large number of bogus links to its website then this will have no real impact on its search engine ranking (see google.com/technology) and instead the key is to ‘offer good content and features’ to naturally increase links to the website (see marketleap.com/linkpopularity).
The complex way in which the prominent websites are linked to each other is bewildering at first, but after research over a period of months, the general area of Hinduism on the WWW can be comprehended and subjected to analysis. Although a discussion of the prominent websites on the WWW and their relationships to each other gives a good impression of Hinduism on the WWW, it is important to emphasise that my method deliberately does not provide a representative sample of Hindu-related websites which would need to include websites that do not feature in the top ten of search engine rankings. As mentioned above, it is actually impossible to obtain a truly representative sample of websites because there is a large number that are not even catalogued by search engines. If this was ignored and the websites identified by various search engines were deemed to be acceptable sampling frames, a quasi-random sampling method (see e.g. McNeill 1990: 37) (refined by giving weight to higher ranked websites) could be applied to the sampling frames a number of times over a given period. This would result in samples of websites which would possibly be more representative of Hindu-related websites on the WWW than those that constitute the general area of Hinduism on the WWW. However, it is my intention to identify those websites that would be encountered by a general seeker and therefore any attempt to achieve a sample of websites which is more representative would actually be undesirable.

A related point which is also worth noting is that because I am only interested in identifying the general area of Hinduism on the WWW and not in obtaining a representative sample, important issues regarding the way that commercial search engines work and the way that owners of websites may be able to manipulate rankings are no threat to the identification of a valid object of study. Similarly, the fact that some individuals/organisations have obtained ‘memorable domain names’ (Bunt 2000: 129) (e.g. hindu.org) which can increase ‘traffic’ to their websites and consequently affect search engine rankings is also of no concern in this context. There might also be the argument that many individuals just go straight to websites that they are already aware of and do not use search engines. However, again, because I am seeking to identify the general area of Hinduism on the WWW, such a criticism does not render my approach invalid.

Not only does an investigation of the general area of Hinduism on the WWW provide a picture of the online situation. As emphasised at the outset of this article, it is also important to realise that the online situation can affect what occurs offline. For example, those Hindu organisations that are prominent on the WWW are not necessarily those that are the most prominent in the ‘offline world’. However, it is the very fact that a group’s online presence is not comparable with their offline presence that is significant because, as I discovered during my research, a strong online presence can lead to increased credibility and influence in the ‘offline world’ – i.e. previously relatively insignificant groups have the potential to become significant as a result of their presence on the WWW.

I will now present in detail the process that I undertook in order to identify ‘the general area of Hinduism on the WWW’:

**Search engine results**

On 13 November, 2004 and 26 October, 2005 I typed ‘Hinduism’ into five popular search engines. The following tables of results show the websites that were ranked in the top ten. Cells containing those websites of organisations or individuals that have websites that appear at least three times in either of the two searches, are coloured. This makes it clear to see that there are a small number of organisations/individuals whose websites populate the top ten across the different search engines. These websites are the ‘prominent websites’ (aside from search engine ranking, three further indicators [see below] are used to justify this categorisation).
Table 1  Search Engine Results for 13 November, 2004

| Rank | Google   | Yahoo!     | AlltheWeb | Ask Jeeves | MSN       |
|------|----------|------------|-----------|------------|-----------|
| 1    | hindunet.org | religioustolerance.org/hinduism | religioustolerance.org/hinduism | hindunet.org | religioustolerance.org/hinduism |
| 2    | religioustolerance.org/hinduism | bbc.co.uk/worldservice/hinduism | hinduism.co.za | hinduism.co.za | hinduisntoday.com |
| 3    | himalayanacademy.com | hinduism.about.com | hinduism.about.com | indiadivine.com | geocities.com/9410/hinduism |
| 4    | hinduism.about.com | hindu.org | hinduisntoday.com | religioustolerance.org/hinduism | hinduism.about.com |
| 5    | hindu.org | ch.sc.edu | geocities.com/9410/hindu | hindu.org | hindunet.org |
| 6    | hinduisntoday.com | attributetohinduism.com | hindunet.org | himalayanacademy.com | geocities.com/7153/hinduism |
| 7    | gessen.de/~gk1415/hinduism | hinduism.co.za | geocities.com/7153/hinduism | d.unm.edu/~thats/hindu | beliefnet.com/index |
| 8    | bbc.co.uk/religion/hinduism | hinduism.com | hinduism.today.com | hinduism.co.za | wikipedia.org/hinduism |
| 9    | hinduism.co.za | hinduisntoday.com | giessen.de/~gk1415/hinduism | attributetohinduism.com | kamat.com/hindu |
| 10   | attributetohinduism.com | geocities.com/9410/hindu | sacred-texts.com/hinduism | hindukids.org | himalayanacademy.com |

Table 2  Search Engine Results for 26 October, 2005

| Rank | Google       | Yahoo!     | AlltheWeb | Ask Jeeves | MSN       |
|------|--------------|------------|-----------|------------|-----------|
| 1    | hindunet.org | religioustolerance.org/hinduism | religioustolerance.org/hinduism | hindunet.org | wikipedia.org/hinduism |
| 2    | religioustolerance.org/hinduism | hinduism.about.com | hinduism.about.com | indiadivine.com | hinduisntoday.com |
| 3    | hinduism.about.com | bbc.co.uk/worldservice/hinduism | hinduism.co.za | hindunet.org | sacred-texts.com/hinduism |
| 4    | himalayanacademy.com | ch.sc.edu | geocities.com/9410/hindu | hinduism.co.za | religioustolerance.org/hinduism |
| 5    | hinduism.co.za | hinduisntoday.com | wikipedia.org/hinduism | himalayanacademy.com | religioustolerance.org/hinduism |
| 6    | hindu.org | geocities.com/9410/hindu | hindunet.org | hindu.org | hinduism.about.com |
| 7    | hinduisntoday.com | hindu.org | hinduisntoday.com | hinduwebsite.com/history | hinduisntoday.com |
| 8    | hinduism.co.za | attributetohinduism.com | bbc.co.uk/religion/hinduism | hinduisntoday.com | himalayanacademy.com |
| 9    | gessen.de/~gk1415/hinduism | wikipedia.org/hinduism | giessen.de/~gk1415/hinduism | iconsofte.com/gita | hinduwebsite.com |
| 10   | wikipedia.org/hinduism | hindunet.org | sacred-texts.com/hinduism | kamakoti.org | geocities.com/9410/hindu |

Discussion of search engine results tables

The two tables show that there was very little difference in the results between the two search dates and that the prominent websites have largely been able to maintain their position during the period of the research.
In 2004 religioustolerance.org/hinduism was second in the Google rankings (out of 918,000 results), first in Yahoo! and AlltheWeb, fourth in Ask Jeeves (now known as Ask.com) (out of 852,200 results) and first in MSN (now known as Windows Live Search) (out of 260,763 results). A year later it was also second in Google (out of 6,440,000 results) and first in Yahoo! (out of 9,500,000 results) and AlltheWeb (out of 8,510,000 results). In Ask Jeeves it had gone up to first (out of 1,688,000 results) and while it had lost top spot in MSN, it appeared twice in the top ten, in fourth and fifth place (out of 1,256,888 results). hindunet.org is first in the Google rankings in 2004 and 2005. In the Yahoo! rankings it slips from eighth to tenth and in Ask Jeeves from first to third. However, it does slip out of the top ten in the MSN rankings altogether. hinduism.about.com has remained remarkably consistent over the period – a slight rise in the rankings of Google, Yahoo! and AlltheWeb and a slight fall in the MSN rankings. Overall, hinduism.co.za has also remained relatively consistent. The BBC websites bbc.co.uk/religion/hinduism and bbc.co.uk/worldservice/hinduism have, collectively, risen from two appearances to three, and geocities.com/9410/hinduism appeared three times in both searches.

The main difference between the two searches is the appearance in the second set of search engine rankings of wikipedia.org/hinduism. This is certainly noteworthy and has resulted in other websites dropping out of the top ten. Whereas the wikipedia.org/hinduism website appeared four times in the 2005 search engine rankings despite the fact that it did not appear in 2004, attributetohinduism.com dropped from three appearances in 2004 to only one in 2005 (position eight in the Yahoo! search engine rankings).

Aside from the consistently high rankings of religioustolerance.org/hinduism, the most striking feature of the results tables is the high incidence of websites from the Saiva Siddhanta Church (SSC) (a Hindu New Religious Movement [NRM] based in Hawaii) (himalayanacademy.com, hindu.org and hinduismtoday.com). Apart from religioustolerance.org/hinduism, the websites from this organisation are the only ones to appear in the top ten of all five of the featured search engines on both of the search dates. Furthermore, in some rankings more than one website from this organisation appears. In 2004 the websites appeared third, fifth and sixth in the Google search engine rankings and in 2005 they appeared fourth, sixth and seventh. In the Yahoo! rankings the websites had gone down from two appearances (at fourth and ninth) to one appearance at seventh. In the AlltheWeb rankings the one SSC website remained (at seventh place compared to fourth). In the Ask Jeeves rankings there were three websites which occupied the same positions (fifth, sixth and eighth) although the order of the specific websites had changed, and in the MSN rankings there was an increase in the number of SSC websites that appeared. In 2004 there was one in second position and one in tenth, while in 2005 there were websites at numbers two, seven and eight.

Alone, these statistics might suggest that there are a relatively small number of organisations that inhabit the general area of Hinduism on the WWW. However, this is only the tip of the iceberg. When a further three indicators are used and the results investigated, I am able to fully demonstrate that certain organisations were able to colonise the general area of Hinduism on the WWW during the period of research. This means that those who were just seeking general information about Hinduism would be certain to come across those websites of a relatively few organisations. Furthermore, even those who choose to look up specific websites are likely, through links, to end up at a website from one of these organisations. Therefore, the three further indicators that I use demonstrate why I classify these websites as ‘prominent’ websites. The three indicators are ‘search engine saturation’, ‘link popularity’, and the links that are revealed using ‘TouchGraph’ mapping software which can then be investigated.
‘Search engine saturation’ and ‘link popularity’

‘Search engine saturation’ and ‘link popularity’ can be ascertained through software available at marketleap.com.10 ‘Search engine saturation’ refers to the number of times that a website address appears in a search engine’s index. Although it is not necessarily related to search engine ranking, it is clear that if a website ‘saturates’ a search engine, this gives an indication of its prominence (see marketleap.com/saturation). ‘Link popularity’ refers to the number of links from other websites that a website has, and, as mentioned above, this affects a website’s search engine ranking. However, in addition to search engine rankings and ‘search engine saturation’, it also gives a partially independent indication of a website’s prominence. ‘Search engine saturation’ and ‘link popularity’ checks11 for the already identified prominent websites were carried out on 11 November, 2005 with the following results:12

Table 3 ‘Search Engine Saturation’ and ‘Link Popularity’ for the Prominent Websites

| Website                  | Total Number of Indexed Pages (‘Search Engine Saturation’) | Number of Links From Other Websites (‘Link Popularity’) |
|--------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| hindunet.org             | 305,023                                                    | 112,455                                              |
| hindukids.org            | 325                                                        | 4,685                                                |
| hindu.org                | 642                                                        | 31,936                                               |
| himalayanacademy.com    | 57,973                                                     | 28,578                                               |
| hindusmtoday.com         | 35,526                                                     | 24,749                                               |
| hinduism.co.za          | 2,055                                                      | 7,741                                                |
| religious_tolerance.org/hinduism | 7                                                          | 1,626                                                |
| hinduism.about.com      | 106                                                        | 1,041                                                |
| bbc.co.uk/religion/hinduism | 1                                                        | 1,610                                                |
| bbc.co.uk/worldservice/hinduism | 4                                                         | 0                                                    |
| attributetohinduism.com | 2,315                                                      | 5,830                                                |
| geocities.com/9410/hinduism | 1                                                        | 108                                                  |
| wikipedia.org/hinduism  | 7                                                          | 2                                                    |

Table 4 Total Aggregate Scores for Organisations Which Have More Than One Website Listed

| Name of Organisation     | Total Aggregate Score for ‘Search Engine Saturation’ | Total Aggregate Score for ‘Link Popularity’ |
|--------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| Hindu Students Council (HSC) | 305,348                                              | 117,139                                   |
| Saiva Siddhanta Church (SSC)  | 94,141                                               | 85,263                                   |
| BBC                      | 5                                                    | 1,610                                    |

These tables demonstrate that among the prominent websites there are two organisations (the SSC and the HSC) that have been far more successful than the others in saturating search engine indexes with their websites. The reason why some websites have a ‘search engine saturation’ figure of less than ten is that they are actually parts of much larger websites which do not deal exclusively with Hinduism. However, as explained above, to all intents and purposes these are also homepages of Hindu-related websites and thus can be comfortably referred to as ‘websites’. The websites with higher ‘search engine saturation’ figures are the actual homepages which form the nucleus of the respective websites and which represent the overall website as a whole. The fact that those websites with such a small ‘saturation’ figure are still prominent Hindu-related websites further demonstrates the significance of those that have a high level of ‘saturation’. Websites of the SSC and the HSC also have by far the highest level of ‘link popularity’ out of all of the prominent websites, which again emphasises the pre-eminence of these organisations.
‘TouchGraph’ link maps

Now that the ‘link popularity’ of the prominent websites has been shown, I will demonstrate how it is possible to explore the links from these websites in more detail. Links are revealed through the use of ‘TouchGraph’ software which graphically shows links between websites (see figs. 1 and 2), and these links can then be followed manually and subjected to analysis. I produced the website linkage ‘maps’ (‘touchgraphs’) on 26 October, 2005. I will now present two ‘touchgraphs’ as examples and show how following the links can help to build up a picture of the general area of Hinduism on the WWW:

Fig. 1 ‘TouchGraph’ for hindunet.org

hindunet.org is a huge portal website offering access to a large amount of Hindu-related material. It is part of the Global Hindu Electronic Network (GHEN) which is a project of the Hindu Students Council (HSC). hindunet.org links to other HSC websites, websites of associated organisations, and websites of organisations which share a similar ideological position to the HSC. There are also links to other websites that appear in the search engine results tables. For example, in one ‘direction’ hindunet.org links to hscnet.org (partially obscured on the ‘TouchGraph’) which is the main website of the HSC. hscnet.org then links directly to hindukids.org which is a teaching resource for children that is part of the GHEN. hindukids.org links to rss.org which is the website of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the fundamentalist Hindu organisation that the HSC is associated with. hscnet.org also links to ekalvidya.org (which is concerned with social development in rural areas of India), to hssworld.org (the website of the US branch of the fundamentalist Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh [HSS]), to sanskrit.gde.to (a resource for learning Sanskrit) and to hindu-university.edu (the website of the Hindu University of America).
In another ‘direction’, hindunet.org links to hindu.org (a directory of Hindu-related websites) which is one of the three websites of the SSC. From there, links extend to the other two SSC websites: himalayanacademy.com (the SSC’s main website) and hinduismtoday.com (an online version of the SSC’s magazine). From hindu.org there is a link to hindulinks.org (primarily a directory of mandirs [Hindu ‘temples’]) which is another website of the HSC. hindu.org also links to hinduism.co.za (a huge resource containing information about Hinduism) – another of the prominent websites. A link is shown to part of the overall religioustolerance.org website which is indicative of a close link to religioustolerance.org/hinduism (another website providing information about Hinduism) which appears in the rankings of every search engine in both of the search engine results tables.16 This ‘TouchGraph’ alone, clearly shows that the prominent websites are linked to each other and that there are also other links between websites of organisations that have similar ideologies.

Fig. 2  ‘TouchGraph’ for himalayanacademy.com

When the SSC’s main website himalayanacademy.com is used as the central node in a ‘TouchGraph’, not only are the unsurprisingly clear links with the other websites of the SSC shown, but the afore-mentioned links to the HSC websites in more than one direction are also clearly demonstrated. There are also links to hinduism.co.za and attributetohinduism.com (a website set up by an individual offering information about Hinduism) – yet another of the prominent websites.

In addition to a consideration of the links originating from the HSC’s hindunet.org and the SSC’s himalayanacademy.com, I produced ‘touchgraphs’ for all of the other prominent websites which did not
belong to the HSC or the SSC and then analysed the links. This confirmed that the prominent websites are closely linked to each other. The full analysis of these links between the websites completes the process which results in the identification of the object of study. This analysis is not included here because the two examples provided above are able to demonstrate the efficacy of the method and additional detail is unnecessary.

Further analysis
The methodological approach outlined in this article is very different from that employed in other research projects in which the method of data collection is usually a separate tool from the data that is collected and does not figure as part of the analysis itself. Instead, the process that allows this object of study to be identified also forms part of the analysis. For example, as a result of the procedure outlined above, I am able to make an important claim: not only are there certain websites which appear high in search engine rankings (and may have a high level of ‘search engine saturation’ and ‘link popularity’), but these websites link to each other. This dense pattern of reciprocal links helps to explain the general area of Hinduism on the WWW which, as has been demonstrated, has been largely colonised by a small number of organisations – a development which is significant given the fact that the online situation can affect what occurs offline.

In turn, this provides the starting point for further analysis of the relationships between organisations and the activities of certain groups. For example, within the general area of Hinduism on the WWW it is clear that, due to their prominence, the websites of the SSC are very important. I have shown that during the period of the research this organisation’s websites appeared frequently in the search engine rankings. Furthermore, even if one of the non-SSC prominent websites were to be initially chosen by a general seeker of Hindu resources online, it is highly likely that they would be led to one of the SSC websites because of the way that the prominent websites are linked. This invites further analysis. For example, I have mentioned that the SSC is responsible for hindu.org which is a directory of Hindu-related websites – and a consideration of this website confirms the SSC’s strong position online. This website is easily accessible and does not overtly appear to be linked to a specific group, and therefore there is no reason to suggest that the links that it offers will not be followed. An important point concerning this, however, is that these links are provided with commentary reflecting the views of the SSC. This is an area that can be further investigated, the relevance and importance of which would never have come to light if it were not for the identification of the general area of Hinduism on the WWW.

Furthermore, once the object of study has been identified, the situation can then be analysed in the light of various sociological theories. For example, in my overall study of the relationship between Hinduism and the Internet referred to in this article, the online situation and the uses of the Internet by the organisations/individuals with the prominent websites were able to be further investigated using the theoretical approaches of globalisation and rational choice. A more detailed picture of the general area of Hinduism on the WWW can also be built up through a consideration of the characteristics of all of the aforementioned prominent websites that are constitutive of this, and this information can lead to further avenues of research.

A note concerning flux
The WWW is in a constant state of flux. For example, website content changes and new websites appear while others disappear. In addition to this, as would be expected, and as I have demonstrated above, the positions of websites in the search engine rankings change over time. Because of this, there is the common belief that this poses a great problem for online research. However, flux is an inherent characteristic of the WWW and is
therefore part of the object under investigation which must be dealt with by researchers. Indeed, if problematic aspects of various subject areas put off researchers then there would be very few sociological studies in existence.

Because of the constantly changing nature of the WWW it is sometimes argued that research can only provide a snapshot in time of the online situation. While this is true to an extent, the idea of a snapshot can be misleading – it gives the impression that if research were carried out, say, six months later, research results would be markedly different and that, apart from providing a snapshot in time, this would render the original research as being of little importance. I believe that although the online situation is indeed constantly changing, the speed and extent of this change is largely exaggerated, at least concerning Hinduism, and therefore it is not necessarily the case that only a snapshot in time is provided. For example, the two online searches were conducted about a year apart from each other. Although there were changes (and it is such changes that are actually sociologically significant!), the overall situation largely remained the same. Furthermore, while content of many websites obviously changes, in some cases change is minimal. In addition to this, even when content does change, website ethos usually remains consistent. For example, some content of the SSC’s main website changes almost daily, but a large amount of the content remains the same and the ethos of the websites of the SSC does not change radically over time. In short, it is wrong to suggest that online research can only provide a snapshot in time. This claim is supported by Dawson who, writing in 2005, argues that since 1998, although there has been an increase in religious websites, ‘the landscape of virtual religion has not changed much’ (Dawson 2005: 30). Further support comes from Cowan (2005: 259) and O’Leary (2005: 39-41) who note that the nature of online Pagan rituals did not alter significantly between 1996 and 2005.

However, it is important to appreciate that change is occurring constantly. For example, in the future it is certainly likely that there will be significant changes in the online situation. If replicable research methods are used though – such as those outlined here – future studies will be able to identify such changes. This is demonstrated by an investigation that I undertook on 29 March, 2007 which showed that the websites of the SSC in the general area of Hinduism on the WWW became far less prevalent than was previously the case.

Against the objection that the WWW is in a constant state of flux and that this means that studies are mere snapshots in time, I would also point out that no area of social life is fully static. For example, Sellitz et al, when talking about rigorous survey design which aims to have a high degree of reliability, state that ‘independent but comparable measures of the same object (or attitude, or whatever) should give similar results’ but then add that ‘provided of course, that there is no reason to believe that the object being measured has in fact changed between the two measurements’ (Sellitz et al. 1962: 148). Then there is always the attendant problem of distinguishing true change from apparent change highlighted by unreliable research methods (Bohrnstedt 1983: 80). This demonstrates that pointing to the online situation and saying that it cannot be adequately researched because it is constantly changing is unfair – traditional offline studies also have to deal with issues concerning the object of study changing.

There are other reasons why I believe that an effective study goes beyond merely being a snapshot in time and these are unrelated to my arguments above. For example, my online research enabled me to directly consider contemporary Hinduism in a number of different ways which are not solely dependent upon the online situation as it currently stands. Furthermore, I was able to demonstrate that a consideration of the online situation and Hinduism in the light of a number of sociological theories also contributes to the understanding of contemporary Hinduism. In doing this, I was also able to assess the strengths and weaknesses of these
sociological theories and in some cases I was able to suggest revisions of the theories as a result of the new situation that has arisen as a result of the Internet. Again, insights are not just dependent upon the current online situation. Therefore, whilst the changing nature of the WWW is fully acknowledged, it is not regarded as being a barrier to online research.

Conclusion
In this article I have attempted to show that despite the huge number of websites on the WWW and other associated problems, an object of study can be identified which allows a fruitful sociological investigation of online phenomena to proceed. Importantly, the methods used in the identification of the object of study can be replicated and therefore future researchers will be able to identify any significant changes in the online situation. Furthermore, the methods outlined here allow the online presence of different religions to be compared.

The discussion of my methodological approach applied to Hinduism on the WWW has also demonstrated that the identification of the object of study is tied up with the processes that occur online. This means that further details are also revealed and that analysis can occur at the same time that the object of study is being identified. As stated at the outset of this article, the process that I propose is but one way of approaching the task of obtaining an object of study which allows productive online research to proceed and hopefully other techniques will be put forward by fellow researchers. In this way, different research methods will be able to complement each other and online methodology will be able to be developed.

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Endnotes

1 Although in common usage the term ‘WWW’ is sometimes used interchangeably with ‘Internet’, the two terms need to be differentiated here. The Internet is ‘the worldwide network of networks’ that ‘connects millions of computers…around the globe’ (Whittaker 2002: 196). These networks ‘consist not only of the physical hardware (computers, cables, satellites etc.), but also the…software protocols, that govern the exchange of data between machines’ (Whittaker 2002: 4 [drawing upon Young 1999]). Amongst other services, the Internet hosts the WWW which refers to the huge number of various interconnected websites.

2 See Scheifinger (2006).

3 Although the number of results for a specific subject can give an idea of its prominence online, it is a far from perfect indicator. For example, some results may merely refer to different webpages within websites (see below for the distinction between these terms), others may refer to websites which are no longer functioning, and some websites included in the total may actually put forward a view which is in opposition to the subject in question.

4 Website addresses (URLs) are shown in full in the Webliography. In the article websites are referred to by the main identifying part of the URL. This is similar to the ‘domain’ name which is the part of the URL after the ‘protocol’ (e.g. http://) and before the first single forward slash (see Buckley and Clarke 2004: 84). The main difference is that it is necessary to refer to some of the websites featured in the article using parts of the URL both sides of the first single forward slash. The method of referring to the websites can be clearly seen in tables 1, 2 and 3.

5 It should be remembered though that innovation in research methods is not solely restricted to online methods – innovation has always been a necessary part of methodological development (see Jankowski and van Selm 2005: 200).

6 I use the term ‘Hindu-related websites’ to refer to a wide array of websites which could, for example, provide general information about Hinduism, specific information relating to a certain tradition or mandir (Hindu ‘temple’), a forum for discussion concerning Hinduism, an opportunity to engage in certain Hindu activities such as the puja ritual which involves honouring a deity or deities, or a combination of some or all of these features. The websites could be produced by various diverse groups such as charitable Hindu organisations, commercial organisations, or individuals; and the target audiences could also be extremely diverse. Because Hinduism is incredibly diverse and can include a wide variety of traditions (see e.g. Jackson 1996; Vertovec 1997: 265) including New Religious Movements (NRMs), what constitutes a Hindu-related website is somewhat arbitrary.

7 Of course, there are other terms that a general seeker could use such as ‘Hindu’, and another strategy might involve guessing ‘obvious’ website addresses such as hindu.org. However, it seems likely that a large proportion of general seekers would begin a search using the term ‘Hinduism’.

8 The follow-up date was chosen as it was approximately one year after the first search which I feel is a reasonable amount of time which promises to highlight any significant differences between results.

9 Although deriving from an older tradition, the SSC was founded in 1949 and so fits Barker’s definition of a NRM as a movement that has ‘become visible in its present form since the Second World War’ and which ‘proposes answers to at least some of the…ultimate questions that have traditionally been addressed by mainstream religions’ (Barker 1999: 16).

10 I was made aware of ‘marketleap’ through Højsgaard (2005: 53).

11 ‘marketleap’ provides ‘search engine saturation’ and ‘link popularity’ figures for the following search engines: Google/AOL, Hotbot, MSN (now Windows Live Search) and Yahoo!/FAST/AltaVista. The aggregate numbers are shown in tables 3 and 4.

12 For clarity, in tables 3 and 4 the websites of a single organisation/individual are coloured using the same colours as in tables 1 and 2.

13 The links that are shown are between ‘similar pages’ – websites that are ‘related’ to the website in question (see google.com/help/features). In addition to the hyperlinks (the navigation elements of websites which allow direct links to other websites/webpages) between websites which identify them as being ‘similar’, other criteria is also used. For example, if other websites frequently mention two websites together then this ‘will cause them to be listed as similar’.

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(touchgraph.com). Therefore, it is important to appreciate that while the links in the ‘TouchGraphs’ do indicate the links between websites, they ‘do not directly represent inbound or outbound hyperlinks’ (touchgraph.com [my emphasis]).

14 The software (available at touchgraph.com) is mentioned by Wakeford in her chapter dealing with online methodology (Wakeford 2004: 39-40), and is used by Helland (see 2004: 28).

15 The ‘TouchGraph’ software has recently been updated and the ‘maps’ that it now produces are more colourful and have additional features.

16 The other websites featured on the hindunet.org ‘TouchGraph’ are not concerned with Hinduism and therefore do not need to be taken into consideration when studying Hinduism on the WWW.

17 The exception to this was in the case of the ‘TouchGraph’ that I produced for wikipedia.org/hinduism which did not reveal any links despite the fact that this website does provide hyperlinks to other websites.