Răzvan Brudiu, Cosmin Joițoiu

Preaching the Gospel Message and Communicating Missionary Values Through Digital and Religious Media

Deacon Lect. Dr. Răzvan Brudiu is Lecturer at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology of the "December 1st 1918" University of Alba Iulia, Romania

Cosmin Joițoiu is specialized in Journalism and Communication and is a student at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology of the "December 1st 1918" University of Alba Iulia, Romania

Abstract

Rapid advancements in technology and communication led to significant shifts in how individuals interact, receive information, and engage with religious and cultural practices. Recent studies already reflect the broader challenges of this matter, so

our purpose is to delve into the proactive stance of the Orthodox Church in adapting to modern information and communication technologies for effective Gospel preaching and mission. We address the challenges journalists face in covering religious topics by examining the impact of media framing on public opinion. Overall, the research provides a comprehensive exploration of the complex relationship between mass media, journalism, religion, and the evolving role of the Church in the digital age. For this study, we employed various methods of research and expression, including the analytical approach to the impact of digital media on society and the Church, examining aspects such as communication dynamics, political influence, cultural shifts, and the challenges and risks associated with these transformations; the comparative analysis of different perspectives, studies, and events, is also used, such as the distinction between digital natives and immigrants, perspectives on happiness in the digital age, and different viewpoints on the intersection of mass media, journalism, and religion. These methods collectively contributed to a comprehensive exploration of the subject matter. They underlined our belief that media use in the Church mission provides a tool for reaching and engaging with its believers. However, since the digitalization of communication brings opportunities and risks, we emphasize the Church's proactive efforts to address these challenges while preserving its traditional Christian values.

Keywords

1   Introduction

The transformative wave of digital communication has left an indelible mark across diverse realms of society, influencing the landscape of education, daily existence, journalism, media, and the ecclesiastical domain. In schools, integrating digital tools has reshaped the learning paradigm, ushering in an era where information is at the fingertips of students, revolutionizing educational approaches and fostering a "tech generation". In day-to-day life, the omnipresence of mobile applications and online platforms has engendered digital anxiety, ushering convenience and connectivity but also posing challenges related to addiction. Journalism grapples with the dynamic interplay of mass media and religion, navigating through challenges such as declining public trust and the imperative to adapt communication strategies to the demands of the digital age. The media landscape has undergone a profound metamorphosis, with digitalization influencing content consumption, dissemination, and the intricate relationship between media and societal perceptions. Simultaneously, the church has embarked on a proactive journey into the digital realm, leveraging modern information and communication technologies to preach the Gospel effectively while cautiously navigating the pitfalls of excessive virtualization.

In this research, we delve into the profound impact of digitalization on various facets of society, tracing the transformative journey over recent decades by tracing the evolution from conventional communication methods to the contemporary era of digital anxiety, where mobile applications offer instantaneous access to information. The focus extends to the Romanian Orthodox Church's dynamic engagement with digital communication, revealing an open attitude in adapting to modern information and communication technologies for effective Gospel preaching. International conferences on digital media and Orthodox pastoral care are highlighted, offering insights into the challenges and opportunities arising from the use of digital phenomena. Navigating the intersection of digital media, journalism, and religion sheds light on the hurdles journalists face in covering religious topics, thus, patterns of interpenetration between mass media

and religion are outlined. By delving into the missionary activity of the Church, we concen-trate on the use of digital communication tools, all regarding the concept of persona. The spotlight is on the Church's pivotal role in catechesis and religious education, particularly in the context of the impact of digitalization on the youth. Initiatives for organized ecclesiastical practices and the preservation of Tradition and Sacraments are also discussed.

2   Redefining the idea of generation

The changes the world has gone through during the last fifty years have been very profound when we refer to redefining the idea of social identity and community. It all started at the time when the classic letter would be replaced by e-mail messages; just as cunning, the mobile phone slipped into our lives[1], only that - in its early days - it was a special way to communicate, expensive and not really within reach. For Romania, the year 1993 represents the time when the first approximately 800 people

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[1]   The beginnings of mobile telephony are much older than the date of the invention of the first mobile phone by Martin Cooper. As in the case of other inventions, it also began in the military field: telephones that were operated by radio, installed on ships, planes and military vehicles. On April 3, 1973, Martin Cooper (employee of the Motorola Company) was leaving the Hilton hotel in Manhattan with a strange *brick* in his hand that he put to his ear and started talking to it. That day, he called his opponent, Joel Engel, head of research at AT&T Bell Labs, while he was walking the streets of New York City, talking about the first Motorola Dyna TAC prototype in front of reporters, asking Engel: "Get guess where I'm calling from?". This was the world's first mobile phone call, and Motorola was the company that made the first truly portable, hand-held mobile phone. In the beginning, mobile phones were heavy, expensive and consumed a lot of energy. In the '90s, they became cheaper and smaller in size, which led to an increase in market demand. In this sense, see Andrei Drăgulinescu, *Idolii fără fir. Telefonia mobilă, poluarea electromagnetică, tehnologia 5G* (București: Sophia Publishing House, 2021), p. 15.

had a mobile phone subscription, so that in almost thirty years, by 2021, the profile market will report 22,929,000 users[2].

Over time, the speed of the Internet increased considerably, the mobile phone became a vital accessory and the two technologies joined forces, so here we are transposed into *the era of digital anxiety*. Certainly, this scenario is a universal one, specific from one country to another by the extent or duration of the process. Still, today, mobile applications are permanently connected to the Internet, updated and ready to meet our longing. Messages, emails, notifications, tweets, alerts, vibrations, and ringtones all race into our pockets to let us know what new things the community has to say. The paradigm shift is more than obvious: we no longer go to our e-mail because the e-mail reaches and notifies us, letters have become WhatsApp messages, vacation photos have developed into quick shares on Facebook, and even press articles are now instant *breaking news*. Everything is *one click away*, and it gets dizzying. That's why Facebook, "on the constant flow of news about everyone and everything, has already created a hysterical vision of the world"[3]. Perhaps the most significant aspect of the Internet remains its impact on communication.

New digital devices and the possibility of connecting to the Internet have substantially changed the coordinates of life. By effortless connection, the new globality accompanies us permanently and is inserted everywhere in the scenery of life we live and work. The contact with virtual space provides us with a lens capable of encompassing the whole world, through which we can see its latest happenings, news, or makings. Several scientific studies have shown an increase in the frequency of use of digital

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[2] According to information provided by the World Bank, *Mobile cellular subscriptions in Romania*, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.CEL.SETS?end=2021&locations=RO&name_desc=true&start=1993 (20.02.2023).

[3] Emanoil Băbuș, *Icons and emoticons. The dictatorship of visibility* (Bucharest: Sophia Publishing House, 2022), p. 185.

devices and Internet connections among adults, youth, and children. Thus, according to the latest sociological analyses, it was found that young people check their mobile phones between 14 and 140 times in a single day, with 42% of smartphone users declaring that they browse their devices whenever they have time. Studies show that in the case of people who automatically look at their phone when hearing a specific sound, this indicates similarities with what happens among animals that react similarly to a pleasant stimulus. The Internet has become the absolute mass media, where each user can be a content creator and receiver but also a spreader of digital materials, freely deciding the list of events and the prominence of each fact in the online area[4]. For the contemporary man, the virtual universe – with its democratization of video content production and its liberalization of access and distribution to all productions, offers new patterns of existence.

Digital hazards dominate the general picture of modern society, both professionally, socially, and privately, thus becoming an anthropological threat. The severity of the digital risk generated in 2013 a report that refers, on the one hand, to the addiction to digital systems and, on the other hand, to the risks for private life because of the spread of digital data through online services, through TV surveillance systems or by geolocation devices. The question arises: is it healthy to continue separating *real-life behaviors from virtual behaviors*, which are no longer so at all, given that devices are part of day-to-day life and induce mobility and hyperactivity? Starting with 2010, society has produced as much information in two days, for example, as it has not done since the invention of writing 5300 years ago, and 90% of that information is stored in digital form today[5].

4   Adrian Sorin MIHALACHE, "Generația internetului în oglinda tânărului bogat. Considerații despre decorul vieții recente, la granița dintre teologie și noile tehnologii", *Horeb*, 2 (2020), pp. 82-85.

5   Jean BOBOC, *Transumanismul decriptat. Metamorfoza navei lui Tezeu*, trad. Manuel Valeriu (Iași: Doxologia Publishing House, 2020), pp. 179-181.

Digital applications have behavioral consequences in the political field as well. A digital report made for Facebook (61 million people) during the elections for the US Congress (2010) shows how, through social networks, people can influence each other. The anxiety is real in terms of both security and privacy. The problem of data anonymity is a loss of information and, implicitly, an ability to extract knowledge and services. Facebook and Google can learn the identity of their users mostly through *crowdsourcing techniques*, using the online activity of certain users to validate the information of others. So, we cannot neglect any hypothesis about the future relationships we will have about digital privacy. This mechanism of collecting information and storing data to process it has been set in motion and nothing could stop it today if we take into account the financial stake related to the *Big Data* industry. The global turnover of *Big Data* amounts to several tens of billions of dollars[6].

The official document on the social teaching of the Orthodox Church, made by a special committee of theologians and published in 2020, identifies and observes "radical new developments in technologies of communication, data-gathering and sorting, mass-messaging, instant global proliferation of information (or misinformation, as the case may be), and so forth. Each such development brings with it numerous beneficial possibilities, such as extremely rapid humane interventions in situations of natural catastrophe or human aggression, or such as new avenues of communication and reciprocal understanding between persons or peoples. Yet these same technologies create new opportunities for malicious abuse or inadvertently harmful misuse. Today, the distinctions between reality and fantasy, between facts and opinions, between news and ideologically motivated propaganda, and between truth and lies have become ever more obscure and fluid precisely because of the enormous power of the internet. In recent years, we have seen numerous

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6   See Jean BOBOC, *Transumanismul decriptat. Metamorfoza navei lui Tezeu*, 181-185.

cases of the systematic corruption of public discourse on the internet by agents of confusion for sowing discord or influencing political trends, principally through deceit and misdirection. Just as pernicious, perhaps, are the unplanned but still quite ubiquitous corruptions induced by the precipitous decline of civility on the internet. The casual and customary use of the rhetoric of blame, provocation, insult, cruelty, harassment, and humiliation – all these spiritually devastating practices are all too common in the atmosphere of internet culture. It may well be that the very nature of modern instantaneous communication makes such evils all but inevitable. The disembodied, curiously impersonal, and abstracted quality of virtual communication seems to prompt the kind of amoral and self-absorbed behavior that the real, immediate presence of another person would discourage. Here, communication can all too often become an alternative to true communion, and destructive of such communion"[7].

A widespread and intriguing concept, suitable to describe the current state of things, is that of the *digital divide*, with the implicit partitioning that we will analyse next. The first category, *digital natives* (a term that emerged together with the technological outbreak, defined and customized since the '80s) includes people born in the multimedia era and had no connection with the previous classic - millennial - period of relating exclusively face-to-face. They are rightly said to be different because they study, work, write and interact using methods that are at least different from the realities of those before them. However, far from us the thought of treating *the reality of digital natives* as a phenomenon of social separation or antithetical positioning, relating to a so-called *traditional generation*. Also, we are not trying to suggest the existence of a *parallel society* in contemporaneity, only that technological and social transformations have happened and are happening at such an alert and dizzying pace

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[7]   **** Pentru Viața Lumii. Către un etos social al Bisericii Ortodoxe. Învățătura socială a Bisericii Ortodoxe în viziunea Patriarhiei Ecumenice*, trad. Viorel Coman & Petre Maican (Oradea, Ratio et Revelatio Publishing House, 2020), p. 120-121.

that we notice a widening of the *fault* between what should co-habitate, a discrepancy of the varieties derived from the typology of the current *modus vivendi*: "we live so intensely and atomized, that even the previously minor differences - five or ten years - acquire the depth of a crevasse. Until the 50s, generations lasted thirty years. From then on, each decade constitutes a distinct era"[8]. To deepen this reality, we emphasize that the impact of the development of technology (as expected) was sensed especially among the younger generations. With a low use of the digital advantage for beneficial purposes, we learn about digital natives that: "they live a large part of their lives using the Internet, without distinguishing between *online* and *offline*. Instead of thinking of their digital and real-space identities as separate dimensions, they have only one identity, with representations in two, three, or more mediums. They are united by a set of common practices, namely the use of digital technologies, the tendency to multitask, to express and relate to each other in digitally mediated ways, and the use of online resources to access and acquire information to create new knowledge and forms of expression. For these young people, the new digital technologies - computers, mobile phones, and sidekicks (BlackBerry, a mobile device with a monochrome display and easy access to email and instant messaging thanks to the included keyboard; nn) - are the primary mediators of interpersonal connections"[9]. A detailed portrait of the digital native from Romania is described in the book named *Facebook. Fabrica de narcisism*, by Teodor Baconschi. We learn from the social media user's profile page that it's "a self-issued mini publisher with continuous media coverage, fatally limited circulation, and zero posterity"[10], the place where love never takes shape, but *the lovers* aren't truly alone either. Everything is

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[8]   Teodor BACONSCHI, *Facebook. Fabrica de narcisism* (Bucureşti: Humanitas Publishing House, 2015), p. 25.

[9]   John PALFREY & Urs GASSER , *Born Digital. Understanding the first generation of digital natives* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), p. 4 .

[10] Teodor BACONSCHI, *Facebook. Fabrica de narcisism* (Bucureşti: Humanitas Publishing House, 2015), p. 25.

redesigned online; there are no longer differences between see-ing and visioning (the entire world map is a satellite away, by the way). At every click, we encounter ostentation, rhetorical over-bidding, false identities, and questionable personalities. In the turmoil of technological expansion, the way digital natives com-municate and relate to society is deeply particularized, which is why not only behavioral and relational schemes are being rede-fined in the community, but also the basic aspects of everyday life, such as the way they experience a friendship or the tools they use to gather information about what is happening in the world.

The nervous system lives in the present tense, and tenseness is constant: we live in an uninterrupted *present time.* Although dig-ital technologies have a strong time-consuming feature and do not exist in time dimensions, they overcome the worldly barrier of the interval. This can be somewhat confusing for someone who has experienced the other historical and social facts of the past, as is the case with the second category of people, namely *digital immigrants*. For them, the challenge lies not necessarily in the method of obtaining information (although we can find quite a few peculiarities here as well), but in redefining the paradigms of communication and community. The childhood of digital im-migrants "was dominated by a different kind of pedagogics and a different educational method, unlike that of children and young people nowadays. If at one time they were categorized as *the TV generation*, now they have been outclassed by *the Internet gen-eration*. The technological challenges were not the same, it's clear"[11]. From another point of view, even if the generations of natives and immigrants still intersect (we are referring here to the working method and approach), especially due to the at-tempts to adapt the second category to the demands of the pre-sent day, the latter "will remain forever stuck in the past, unable to fully understand the natives. [...] The characteristics of immi-grants include reluctance to use the Internet as the main source

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11   Liviu VIDICAN-MANCI, *Propovăduirea evangheliei în era digitală* (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2020), p. 46.

of information, printing and thus correcting documents, instead of editing them on computers, and reading dedicated manuals, rather than mastering new technologies through clumsiness and mistakes"[12].

In Romania, the intermediate generation of digital immigrants had its challenges, as is the case of those who were called *Generation PRO*, named for PRO TV – the first Romanian media trust known especially for presenting to the public, starting from the year 1995, the *reality shows*, televised *games of chance* and *news magazines of immediate interest* (accidents, catastrophes, crimes, mundane events, sports or related to celebrities articles etc.). After this outbreak of press materials addressed to an audience that was anyway a great consumer of yellow journalism, "the mental rapture on the youth was subsequently aggravated by an exponential multiplication of the factors of denial of reality: the invasion of video games[13], alcoholism, trade-in ethnobo-

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[12] Ilan MANOR , Ronit KAMPF, "Digital Nativity and Digital Diplomacy: Exploring Conceptual Differences Between Digital Natives and Digital Immigrants", *Global Policy* , 13/2022, p. 444.

[13] If in the year 1978, sales in the gaming industry accumulated 50 million dollars, four years later, 8 billion dollars worth of video games had been sold. To understand the success enjoyed by gaming, remember that compared to the digital games industry, in 1982, the pop music industry earned only half of this amount - 4 billion in revenue, while Hollywood films collected only 3 billion. The costs of producing a game vary depending on its complexity, so a simple game can be produced spending a few hundred dollars or it can reach $265 million, as in the case of Grand Theft Auto 5. If in 2012 the game market had a value of $70.6 billion, in 2020 it reached $159.3 billion, the $200 billion threshold being estimated to be reached this year (2023). We notice that the way of consuming digital games has gradually changed, in the sense of abandoning the purchase of games in physical format and switching to buying access to them. See Călin CREȚU, "Distribuţia şi consumul de jocuri digitale în era accesului", *Media în era digitală. Oportunităţi şi inovaţii*, editor: Elena Abrudan, Cluj-Napoca, Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2021, pp. 111-112.

tanical products or even the trafficking of hard drugs, the trivial-
ization of pornography with the expansion of Internet access[14],
the appearance of music TV channels, which in excess can have
the same hallucinogenic effect. The action of the classic
«shaping» backgrounds - family, school, church - was minimal or
exaggerated, so it only amplified a general tendency of
"liberation" that was justified in principle, but poorly applied"[15].

3   The emoticon of skilled joy: foray into the current process of diluting happiness epitomes

But now the question arises: are the users of the Internet happy,
either native or immigrant? What is the distinctiveness of their
happiness or unhappiness according to age categories? As the
popularity of social platforms and digital media tends to borrow
more and more of our time, it's understandable that such ques-
tions arise. In a study related to the anthropological aspect of
happiness and *sadness*, Professor Neil Thin of the University of

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[14] What was once a taboo subject is now commonplace. If you want
pornography, you can get it instantly, anonymously, without any
financial or emotional cost. Pornography has also been altered by the
internet, losing any residual innocence or modesty it may have once
had. Like every other branch of the entertainment industry,
pornography is now in competition with itself as well as with
everything else, and the distinction between consumption and
participation, or between staged and real, has become increasingly
blurred. There is also the risk that some people will suffer at the hands
of others, from the exploitation of the vulnerability to the trafficking of
illicit material, so the digital combination of distance, anonymity and
concealment can be a toxic mix. Sexual abuse, trafficking and illegal
forms of pornography are only a micro-aspect of the dark side of digital
networks, but they are among the most cruel and attention-grabbing
manifestations and must be attacked by laws and people must be
protected from them. See Tom CHATFIELD, *Cum să prosperi în era digitală*,
trad. Alex Bălă (Bucureşti: Vellant Publishing House, 2016), pp. 93-97.
[15] Teodor BACONSCHI, *Facebook. Fabrica de narcisism* (Bucureşti:
Humanitas Publishing House, 2015), p. 114.

Edinburgh defines the first state as the basic element for establishing a social hierarchy; desired or actual, the feeling of happiness can be a cause of social integration, but also exclusion. The author presents three general perspectives that derive from the idea of happiness: *motivational* – when the essential particularity involves the idea of the organizing criterion of individual aspirations; *evaluative* - on a personal level or concerning those around, in this case, the element that makes the differentiation being a predominantly cultural one, and *emotional* - which manifests itself at the level of the psychological association of the reward-related cognition in the brain, the engine of generating emotions. Up to this point, the statements of the study are based on the particularities of the cultural aspect of people's self-evaluation, with themselves and the community they belong to. However, N. Thin adds five other perspectives to the previous classification: *the universal status of happiness* as a purpose in life, postponement or *continuous joy*, *altruism*, *compromise* and - of particular interest to us - *display*. About the latter, a professor from the University of Edinburgh states: "Individuals and cultures vary in their attitudes or principles concerning the display of happiness and sadness. For some, appearing happy even in adversity is a guiding moral principle on the understanding that showing sadness amounts to loss of face or a selfish distribution of something undesirable. For others, displaying happiness may be disapproved, perhaps because of an underlying belief that happiness is a limited good. Or both happiness and sadness may be regarded as emotions that must not be overtly or grossly displayed"[16]. No matter how we apprehend this issue, we are only talking about a temporary pleasure, an artificial form of happiness, because of using digital media.

Another extensive study on this topic was carried out by Daniel Miller, professor of anthropology at University College London

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[16] Neil THIN, "Happiness and the Sad Topics of Anthropology", University of Bath: *Wellbeing in Developing Countries Working Paper* 10/2005, p. 23, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237295096_Happiness_and_the_Sad_Topics_of_Anthropology (03.03.2023).

(UCL). From his material *How the world changed social media*, we learn that the deep human feeling of the search for happiness can also manifest itself on a daily basis, but in a very fluid and superfluous way: "One of the most common discourses about social media in several of our field sites, particularly among young people, is that social media does bring happiness, but only of a fleeting kind. Even as individuals find excitement and pleasure in technologies such as electronic games, music, television[17] and film, so does social media provide a source of entertainment that makes people happy, for a while"[18]. Of course, all this has other implications: the accumulation of stress, harassment, licentious language, etc.

A group of researchers from the Erasmus University in Rotterdam carried out an extensive comparative analysis during which they evaluated values of the degrees of happiness shown by Internet users, as well as how the negative aspects of the use of digital technologies can influence them. All data collected and used were recent, having been published between the years 1999 and 2019. Together, the studies covered 1,055,826 respondents from over 100 countries. The investigated subjects included the general population, but also particular groups, such as teenagers and the elderly, thus 117 basic findings were extracted. The novelty element of the scientific approach led by

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[17]   According to biophysicist Virgil Gheorghe, the force of attraction of television, the avoidance method, in essence, can be understood only through the prism of the religious phenomenon. On the one hand, by all these means, man recently seeks to fill the emptiness of his soul that has arisen as a result of the breaking away from all connection with God, and on the other hand, from the breaking up of all connection with God, the attraction to the world of dream and illusory pleasures is caused by the desires, the addictions that television and entertainment cultivate in the souls of people from the first years of life. Therefore, the foundation of the process of liberation from the area of consumer culture can be achieved only through spirituality. See Virgiliu GHEORGHE, *Ştiinţa şi războiul sfârşitului lumii. Faţa nevăzută a tele-viziunii* (Bucureşti: Prodromos Publishing House, 2007), p. 343.

[18]   Daniel MILLER *et alii*, *How the world changed social media* (London: UCL Press, 2016), p. 200.

Erasmus University researchers derives from the fact that an algorithmic filtering and quantification method was used, a technical innovation called *The World Database of Happiness*. It is the archive of all studies and findings in this area of expertise, using a standardized format of its content and equally standardized terminology to generate its results: "We describe these findings in a standard *search page* format and terminology online, which are sorted by subject, place, time and approach. The method provides an overview of the available research results on happiness and prepares the synthesis of the quantitative research"[19]. Another particularity consists in exploiting the tendency of the migration of the research work method from writing to digital text, which makes it considerably easier to find relevant information, their effective correlation, and insertion into a standardized analysis scheme. The conclusions of that comparative analysis aim towards several angles of approach to the connection between the Internet and happiness, the first one claiming that if we only reduce to a general use of the Internet, we can find a positive association with the feeling of happiness. Often, the negative findings are related to excessive internet use, especially among teenagers and people who feel marginalized and lonely, showing a negative association between spending too much time online and the idea of happiness. Online shopping is positively associated with increased satisfaction, while online gaming does not appear to influence this feeling either positively or negatively. It can be concluded that "the internet can be a blessing or a curse depending on how it is used and who is using it. Most elements of the internet are positively related to happiness, but spending too much time on the internet is often negatively related to happiness. Youngsters, lonely people and people with low levels of self-esteem are at risk of problematic internet use (PIU). Social media, used most intensely by young people, adds to this risk because it makes happy people happier and unhappy people unhappier. […] The elderly especially (65+) seem to profit

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19   *World Database of Happiness*,
      https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/ (22.02.2023).

from using the internet. It is too early to draw firm conclusions because, in most of the studies, the correlations were weak and only a few studies examined the chain of causality"[20].

Because we mentioned video games[21], we will make a short trip into their universe, especially because some of them use religious concepts and symbols, the most common perspectives being apocalyptic and eschatological. Professor Rachel, Wagner of Ithaca College's Department of Religious Studies, analyzed the key features of the analogy between video games and religion. One of the most important gaming products researched is *Darksiders,* a game based on the Book of Revelation, in which the player individually takes on the role of the four horsemen of Saint John's writing (although the study only talks about one horseman of the Apocalypse, we specify that R. Wagner focused only on the first edition of the game, from the year 2010; subsequently, three more variants appeared, but the central theme is the same: the fight between Good and Evil, with the intervention of the apocalyptic character in the development of the conflict); *Left Behind: Eternal Forces*, a real-time strategy (RTS) game also based on the Book of Revelation, as well as some apocryphal writings (the action takes place in a historical period dominated by the governance of the Antichrist, on which occasion the gamer can come to the aid of God...) and the game *El Shaddai: Ascent of the Metatron,* whose script is developed starting from the apocryphal writing Book of Enoch. The apocalyptic elements used by the game makers include messengers from another world, pseudo-epigraphy, visions of time that illustrate a periodization towards a final moment of history, and an imminent eschatological crisis. The mentioned video games are thoroughly analysed from the point of view of the symbolism and tropes used in their

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[20] Ruut VEENHOVEN, Rijn VOGELAAR, in "Does the internet make us happier?" A research synthesis using an online findings archive Ruut Veenhoven & Rijn Vogelaar", https://personal.eur.nl/veenhoven/2010s/2019p-full.pdf (20.02.2023).

[21] For May many details, see Virgiliu GHEORGHE, *Efectele televiziunii asupra minţii umane şi despre creşterea copiilor în lumea de azi* (Bucureşti: Evanghelismos Publishing House), 2007, pp. 414-417.

development, the particularity of the subject discussed being an obvious one, even if the gaming technology remains in continuous development. We retain part of the conclusion, on which occasion we also emphasize the new... *relaxing effect of the arrival of the apocalypse*: "Some of these contemporary remediations of the apocalypse are simply «fun» activities meant to give people a break from the stifling flow of confusing g information overwhelming their daily lives. [...] The dualism of friend or foe, the wish for an interpreter to tell us what to do, and the desire for manageable views of time all make the digital algorithm of gaming apocalypses an alluring model for viewing real-life experiences too – and herein lies the danger"[22].

How contemporary society relates to the realities of the *digital continent* is also reflected through the perspective of the development mechanisms of the European Union. According to a study by the Commission, carried out in 2018, which refers to the impact of the Internet and social networks on young people, Romania is still at an early stage regarding the applied appropriation of the specifics of the term *digital competence*: "a «loose» concept: one that is not well-defined, still emerging, with meanings varying based on users from different approaches. However, it is a strongly political term by nature, reflecting beliefs and wishes about the future skills, thought to be necessary for capable citizens"[23]. Digital competence is gradually becoming a natural part of society, surpassing the classical understanding of PC operating skills, for example. Regarding the same study, the digital competence of *capable citizens* is illustrated, then, by the conceptions, goals and expectations of a new type of knowledge so-

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[22] Rachel WAGNER, Video Games and Religion, *Oxford Handbook Topics in Religion* (online ed., Oxford Academic, 3 Feb. 2014), https://academic.oup.com/edited-volume/41330/chapter/352333273 (26.02.2023).

[23] F. Lupiañez VILLANUEVA *et alli*, *Study on the impact of the internet and social media on youth participation and youth work: final report* (Brussels: European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2018), p. 26.

ciety, defined by the following characteristics: (1) technical-digital skills (2) ability to use digital technologies effectively for work, study and in everyday life, (3) the ability to evaluate digital technologies critically and (4) the motivation to participate and engage in digital culture. Of course, we are talking about a programmatic document of the EU, intended for the young generations to follow, but we can very well observe that the new era in which we stepped, a few decades ago, is particularizing and redefining its demands, including the level of the human skills base. A more applied approach to the concept presented by the EU Community forum (and certainly closer to the conventional reality) states that "the best way to conceptualize this continuum of technology adeptness is in terms of *digital fluency*. Digital fluency is the ability to reformulate knowledge and produce information to express oneself creatively and appropriately in a digital environment"[24].

If we apply *the digital filter* to the ordinary believer and make some distinction between their behavior according to whether they are online or offline, we can highlight a greater openness to daily communication and establish new friendships with those who use digital media. We do not make this statement to generate a ranking based on online-offline principles, but it is worth noting how members of the online community with certain spiritual affinities actively participate in discussions on faith, with the specification that emotional and self-esteem barriers are overcome much more easily in cyberspace[25]. Thus, what in the immediate past were specific requirements, will become common skills shortly. Jean Claude Larchet describes this reality, noting that: "states consider it a moral duty to reduce the *digital divide*, i.e., the supposed division and inequality between two categories of citizens: one, considered superior, which has access

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24   Qian (Emily) WANG, Michael D. MYERS, David SUNDARAM, "Digital Natives and Digital Immigrants. Towards a Model of Digital Fluency", *Business & Information Systems Engineering*, 5 (2013), p. 409.

25   Nicolae DASCĂLU, "De la mass-media clasice spre mediile digitale în misiunea Bisericii", în *Ortodoxia*, 3 (2015), p. 45; Daniel MILLER *et alii*, *How the world changed social media* (Londra: UCL Press, 2016), p. 195.

to the media, and another, considered inferior, disadvantaged, who does not have access to these means of communication. Hence their concern to ensure that there are no longer parts of the country without coverage in terms of television, internet or mobile telephony[26], to eliminate the risk of creating a category

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[26] The first commercial inauguration of cellular telecommunications was made by NET in Japan in 1979, and in 1981 the NMT (Nordic Mobile Telephone) system was launched in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. These mobile phone systems later became known as *first generation (1G) mobile phones*. In the 90ᔆ, *second generation (2G)* mobile phone systems began to be introduced. The size of mobile phones was reduced to around 200 grams and could be easily held in the hand. The second generation introduced a new form of communication, namely SMS text messaging. The first SMS message generated by an electronic machine was sent in 1991 in the UK, and the world's first SMS text message was sent in 1993 in Finland. The 2G generation also introduced the possibility of having media content on mobile phones. The first experimental pre-commercial 3G network was launched in May 2001 by Japan's NTT DoCoMo. Within the 3G applications, wireless internet access services, email, video conferencing and multimedia services were included. The introduction of 4G technology took place in 2009, by a Swedish company (TeliaSonera) in the cities of Stockholm and Oslo. In Romania, 4G has already been introduced from December 2012. 4G technology allows users to download content from the Internet at speeds approximately five to ten times higher than 3G. Both 3G and 4G technology allow access to the Internet on your smartphone. 5G technology, however, seems to be a qualitative leap forward. The expected advantages of 5G are an exponential increase in the speed of downloading information, greatly increased upload speeds, significantly reduced latency (the time required for the device to communicate with wireless networks). Discussions surrounding the introduction of this technology are currently (2020) in full swing, with arguments for and against and increasingly heated discussions. Towards the end of 2019, China officially announced that it had launched the research that will enable the development of the new 6G technology. 6G is expected to start being rolled out between 2027 and 2030. The new technology will enhance the facilities and performance offered by 5G, offering greater system capacity, higher data rate, lower latency, and quality of service superior to that offered by 5G. According to recent scientific studies, after the year 2030, even if the smartphone and the tablet will still be present, there will be an abundance of human-machine interfaces. Among the future

of citizens disadvantaged, thus excluded from such benefits"[27]. Added to this is the social and economic pressure, all with the statement that the situation will not last much longer, because things will become homogeneous or, in other words, there will be equal opportunities for all.

4   Healing through communication: particularities of the religious message in the Romanian mass media

In this next chapter, we will focus on the mass media phenomenon, and we will approach it both from a journalistic and theological perspective, with the idea that the questions of the media differ fundamentally from the questions of the orthodox believer. Journalistic informational material must provide, in the end, tangible explanations about *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, *how,* and *why*. We are making an abstraction here, to some extent, from essays and opinion journalism. Professor Mihai Coman, founder of the School of Journalism and Communication Sciences at the University of Bucharest, deals with the relationship between mass media and religion in his book *Mass-media, religie,*

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applications of 6G technology, wearable devices embedded in clothing will become widespread; touch-screens will become obsolete, being replaced by devices with which it will be possible to communicate verbally and through gestures; technology will be sophisticated enough to predict our needs and fulfill them, through devices that use the concept of context-awareness; self-driving cars, which today is only in the concept stage, will be commercially available; digital money will become the norm; a large number of small robots will cooperate in the performance of domestic tasks; the health care field will be substantially transformed, being able to offer, through a series of wearable devices, a permanent monitoring of vital parameters, both for sick and healthy people, etc. In this regard, see more details in Andrei DRĂGULINESCU, *Idolii fără fir. Telefonia mobilă, poluarea electromagnetică, tehnologia 5G* (București: Sophia Publishing House, 2021) pp. 16-26.

[27] Jean-Claude LARCHET, *Captivi în internet*, trad. Marinela Bojin, (București: Sophia Publishing House, 2016), p. 11.

spațiu public. The general acceptance of international approaches regarding the religious phenomenon and the mass media traces three patterns of interpenetration: the *common posture religion*, namely the moment when the mass media affects the essence of religion because it succeeds in diluting its spiritual message by taking religious symbols out of context and orienting them towards a commercial and entertainment audience; the hypostasis of *deep symbiosis*, especially defined by the common essence of the two, namely the transmission of the message, this being the case where the mediatization of religious phenomena is effective from a journalistic point of view, and the hypostasis of the so-called *metaphorical religions*, in which case novel hybridizations appear. Still, there is also a challenge from the point of view of the journalistic approach when it comes to covering some topics with religious content.

From a pragmatic journalistic point of view, four reasons can be identified for the fact that religious subjects are dealt with precaution: "a) religion, as an experience of individuals, is difficult to source; journalistic canons require facts to be linked to sources that can explain those phenomena through elements that can be proven, through interests or rational motivations; the religious experience, the deep feelings and the deeds derived from here are difficult to insert in such a matrix; b) journalism claims its actuality, while religions claim that their object is what lies beyond what happens *hic et nunc*; c) for journalists, religions appear as complex facts, difficult to comprehend and explain in the news format; d) religions turn up as inevitably controversial; journalists avoid such topics, where they can easily cause discontent, offend (even without intention) and become victims of lawsuits"[28]. So, the press is in trouble when it comes to the satisfactory, documented and comprehensive approach to the forms of manifestation and spiritual essence specific to religion. An attempt to frame the religious theme in a journalistic manner is not easy to achieve, especially without knowing both fields. When

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[28]   Mihai Coman, *Mass-media, religie, spațiu public* (București: Polirom Publishing House, 2020), p. 61.

we talk about the aspects that can influence the concept of (digital) religious media, we must also take into account the following particularities: first of all, digital religious practice is conditioned by the situation of the framework in which it takes place and cannot be understood outside of this specific cultural context; secondly, digital religious practices involve strategic methods of acting in different social environments, situations that require the practitioner to have a good understanding of the place where he is, the purpose he has planned and the route he has to follow; thirdly, digital religion is conditioned by the awareness and acceptance of the existence of limitations or constraints, also applicable depending on the place of practice[29]. Therefore, we cannot universalize a unitary journalistic practice regarding religion, whether we are talking about classical or digital media. Cultural, social, national and, finally, confessional peculiarities cause cracks in the protective layer of the rigours of the journalistic act, making it different in practice, for example, in Islamic countries compared to Christian-Orthodox ones.

From the perspective of priest Gheorghe-Cristian Popa, the general director of Trinitas TV, the main challenges that may arise in the practice of journalism and that affect the moral-spiritual life are: 1. *External constraints for the occultation of the truth*. It is known that most media institutions in Romania are located in the private sector, where the leader of the institution is also its financier, and if the ideological orientation of the owner is distorted and distorting, the employed journalists are put in a situation to participate, against their will, in the concealment of the truth; 2. *Satisfying the audience's preference for the spectacular.* It is known that the best-selling publications or the most watched television shows are those that promote sexual scandals, and intimate aspects of worldly and political life, exploiting the soul weaknesses of the people who make up the target audience. Thus, in the rush for ratings and commercial profit, some

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[29]   Heidi A. CAMPBELL, Ruth TSURIA (editors), *Digital Religion. Understanding Religious Politics in Digital Media* (Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2022), pp. 30-33.

institutions adopt an editorial policy based on the public's desire to perform, a policy to which journalists must adhere from the moment they are hired; 3. *Ordered attacks and abandonment of religious beliefs*. For most media institutions, religious information is of interest only from three perspectives: a) miracles, b) major events in the life of the Church, and c) clerics who commit a moral sin, especially sexual scandals. Many journalists are put in a position to present the information tendentially because it *catches on with the public* and because they are asked to do so by the editorial office; 4) *Temptations of the job*. In addition to the professional constraints within the institution for which they work, journalists also face many challenges from the outside: threats from influential people whose political or commercial interests are affected by compromising media appearances, offers of material goods in exchange for promotion, the temptation to blackmail persons who have violated the law or invaded the privacy of the private life of public persons; 5. *The passions of occupational stress*. The stress factors specific to the profession of journalists are responsibility for the content of the information disseminated, time pressure specific to the media, attendance at traumatic events, conflicts of ideas, etc.; 6. *The profession is a* "*second nature".* The journalist must always be connected to what is happening in the world, and his biological rhythm must be as alert as the rhythm of the society he is screening. The rush for news has become a way of life for journalists so that some journalists no longer differentiate between their professional and personal lives. Due to the supposed inability to establish a boundary between professional and personal, many journalists end up having communication problems with those close to them[30].

The admittance and openness of today's society to modern instruments of communication is an unprecedented advantage if a

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[30] See more details in Gheorghe-Cristian POPA, *Preotul misionar în areopagul mediatic. Mijloace moderne de comunicare în pastorația ortodoxă* (București: Cuvântul Vieții Publishing House, 2013), pp. 133-138.

few principles and limits are followed. In the media "we must distinguish, choose, creatively adapt what corresponds to the content (Which is Christ), both in terms of word and image, because not just any image and not just any word are suitable for the word of the Gospel. We need technical professionalism doubled by spiritual prophetism, not by secularized mimicry. We are often tempted to imitate the secular, but we must not only imitate but surpass, take what is good and transcend what is self-sufficient, to find the state of communion"[31]. Priest Nicolae Dascălu, director of Lumina journals and coordinator of the Basilica Press Centre in Romania, deepens the topic regarding the communication of religion through mass media and digital media, especially in his book *Parabola făcliei aprinse. Comunicarea religioasă în era informaţională*. The basic peculiarity that we emphasize when we talk about the differences in approach specific to the two "spokesmen", results from the fact that, for the secular environment, *journalistic activity* is a profession, while, for the *religious communicator*, the approach falls within the scope of service and the mission, simultaneously. Therefore, we cannot derive from the fundamental message of salvation that the Church and religious communication alike preach, including in what represents the presence on the media scene, the practical information aspect of religious communication being secondary to that of feeding the spiritual needs of the believer. Although it conforms to journalistic deontological requirements, "a gap, however, separates the Churches from the secular environments and it comes from the ideals they animate: on the one hand, the orientation towards the transcendent and eternity, on the other, the concern for materiality and living the moment"[32].

If religious journals are sought after by the reading public, it is because interest in the religious phenomenon is an ongoing fact.

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[31] †DANIEL, MITROPOLITUL MOLDOVEI ŞI BUCOVINEI, "Fundamente teologice ale actului comunicaţional şi coordonate ale apostolatului mediatic în epoca actuală", *Candela Moldovei*, 7-8 (2003), p. 18.

[32] Nicolae DASCĂLU, *Parabola făcliei aprinse. Comunicarea religioasă în era informaţională* (Bucureşti: Basilica Publishing House, 2012), p. 308.

More broadly, we could separate the readers of religious journals into two categories: believers and readers with spiritual affinities. While the state of fact is relatively quantifiable, when it comes to print, the impact of media preaching is harder framed. Here intervenes the need for the Church's active role as a communicator, which - unlike the written word - acquires a tangible bidirectional component, that is why we emphasize the following advantages: "a) guided by the Holy Spirit, the Church can identify with greater certainty the values that are required to be developed or protected at a given time; b) because the Church was established to serve the Kingdom of God, it has no other interest than unselfishly fulfilling its duties, unlike workers or institutions in secular society; c) The Church can share with all people of good faith, the hope that is rooted in the Risen Christ. Beyond optimism and utopia, nothing can support hope better than the existence of a community of faith with which other communities can start a dialogue"[33].

Basilica Press Centre of the Romanian Patriarchate deals with fulfilling the catechetical work and missionaries of the Romanian Church, showing us that Orthodox spirituality is adapted and applied to the contemporary life model, intending to identify those bridges that can be useful to the Christian user of digital media channels. The lives of the saints, the patristic and philokalic word, the illustration of the divine worship, as well as the contemporary practical aspects of the believers' lives are the main resources used for the development of visual and textual multimedia materials of the communication and catechesis activity of the Romanian Orthodox Church. The increased interest of Romanians in the use of social networks and the current trend of aligning with digitalization requirements have urged the Church to find new methods of adapting the evangelical message, especially its information and catechesis component, to the specifics of online and multimedia communication. Starting from the fact that the catechetical mission involves the act of communication

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[33] Nicolae Dascălu, *Parabola făcliei aprinse. Comunicarea religioasă în era informaţională* (Bucureşti: Basilica Publishing House, 2012), p. 309.

(but not always bidirectional, of a reactionary type), Gh. Anghel identified in his paper *Noi mijloace de cateheză pe reţelele de socializare: Centrul de Presă Basilica - Studiu de caz al Agenţiei* the main types of graphic composition used by the Romanian Orthodox Church to fulfil its mission. Apart from the justification brought to the approach by the contemporary realities of communication patterns, we also take into account the fact that 90% of the information assimilated by the human brain is of a visual type, thus enhancing the ability to memorize. This is also the reason why the declared purpose of the Basilica Press Centre is to inform, not to catechize. The first consequence is that the hierarchs of the Romanian Orthodox Church do not have accounts on social networks (unlike the practice of other Orthodox Churches), preferring missionary activity *in the field*. The communication strategy of the Basilica Agency includes - among others - the choice of current topics, the presentation of religious events of national and international interest, and the adaptation of messages to the personalized Christian-Orthodox calendar, all in the framework of the use of infographics and textual materials. The Romanian Orthodox Church, through the Basilica Press Centre of the Patriarchate, thus responded to the needs of its believers, the initiative being important from two perspectives: "1. It highlights the progress the Church is making in carrying out its communication and mission, by adapting catechesis to the requirements of today's highly digitized society; 2. It shows its openness to a new research topic in this interdisciplinary field that studies the catechetical mission in social media, especially through digital means"[34].

Another important aspect of Romanian Orthodoxy, also investigated by Gh. Anghel, refers to the construction of the Romanian People's Salvation Cathedral, the building where the largest iconostasis in the world is located, with a length of 23.8 m and a

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[34] Gheorghe ANGHEL, "Noi mijloace de cateheză pe reţelele de socializare: Centrul de Presă Basilica - Studiu de caz al Agenţiei", *Revista Teologică*, 4 (2021), p. 74.

height of 17.1 m, an aspect confirmed by the World Record Academy. The iconostasis includes 45 icons made in Byzantine style and placed on four registers. Also, on the apse of the altar is the largest representation of the Mother of God (Platytera) in Romania, measuring 16 meters from the base to the top of the halo. Although Romania is a predominantly Orthodox country (73.60% of the population shares this belief, according to the Census carried out in Romania in 2021) this initiative of the Romanian Orthodox Church - for which the foundation stone was laid by Patriarch Daniel in 2007 - has caused a lot of controversy for and against in the public space. The study *Religion and the importance of media framing: The Romanian National Cathedral in the secular press* captures the reflection in the national and international media of the Romanian Orthodox Church's initiative to build the mentioned edifice of worship, starting from the principle that the press also has the duty of forming and influence public opinion (along with informing, educating, culturizing, etc.). The researched period includes the years 2007-2021 and follows aspects of the journalistic phenomenon such as the periodicity and frequency of articles over the years, the perspective of approaching the subject dealt with by journalists (economic, religious, social, moral, etc.), the angle of approach in which is presented to the public the initiative to build the Romanian People's Salvation Cathedral (positive, neutral or negative). The 311 press articles, analysed and selected from a total of 400 titles, highlighted a tendency for journalists to *conflict with* the subject, with the focus on the financial implications of the construction of the Cathedral, respectively the justification or non-justification of the use of public money for a project with religious implications. The conclusions of the study emphasize the strong impact of the presentation perspective chosen by journalists on how the initiative of the Romanian Orthodox Church will be perceived later, which is why "the increase in the number of materials focused on the conflict can make the public hostile towards the project, can increase the hostility between believers and non-believers or can amplify ideological tensions at the national level. In summary, using these frames could polarize public opinion

only in a critical direction, demonizing the Cathedral as an expensive project, useless in relation to other projects that could benefit from the allocated public money, thus contributing to the decrease of the population's trust in the ecclesiastical institution"[35].

The latest study carried out by the Reuters Institute, *Digital News Report 2023*, which analysed 46 media markets to highlight relevant aspects regarding the consumption of news worldwide, signals for Romania a decrease in public trust in the mass media, respectively a quota of 32%. The analysis includes 32 media channels from Romania (16 are specifically TV, radio and print media, and 16 are activating online); in the last six years, the decrease in the level of trust in the Romanian mass media was 7%[36].

Recent research on the prospects for the opportunity to use marketing and public relations concepts in the Church (conducted by Lukasz Sulkowski, Grzegorz Ignatowski and Robert Seliga, professors at different Universities in Poland) illustrated the two concepts in a new perspective. For our purpose, we will highlight the alternative for the Church to distinguish the concept of marketing as not only a purely economic, corporatist term, but also a notion of organization, correlation and, finally, generative ways in which public opinion, including believers, perceives the institution itself. The consequences are social and moral as well as missionary and catechetical. So, if we empty the term marketing of any business component, restricting it to its organizational role, we find that any institution, including the Church, has such concerns, to a lesser or greater extent, depending on the needs. The society we live in is not a static one, nor a very peaceful one, which means that people's needs, including those of a spiritual

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[35]   Gheorghe Anghel, "Religion and the importance of media framing: The Romanian national cathedral in the secular press", *Styles of Communication*, 1 (2023), p. 114.

[36]   Nic Newman *et alii*, *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023*, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism/University of Oxford, pp. 94-95, https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-06/Digital_News_Report_2023.pdf (20.02.2023).

type, are much more applied, precise, and we could even say much more urgent. Starting from these realities, contemporary man is in search of advice and guidance, eager for recovery and reinforcement. The Church is the solution, indeed, but its image is often the subject of controversy (as we have seen in the previous paragraphs), being sometimes associated with the idea of propaganda, considered responsible for the desacralization of religion, guilty of wasting public funds and invading the personal life of the faithful, in brief, incompatible with the pastoral mission and in contradiction with the biblical models it preaches. The study *Public Relations in the Perspective of the Catholic Church in Poland* [37] deals with these challenges of the contemporary Church also from the perspective of public relations (acting), as a complement to marketing (behaviour). If the implementation of the concept of public relations has become a concern for the Church as well, we should not neglect marketing either, which is the basis of *the exit* into the digital world of church institutions. Analysis, planning, implementation, follow-up and control, volunteering and, finally, the achievement of the missionary goal, are the stages that the Polish university teachers recommend for the rigours of activities in the digital environment, and not only that. We will also mention the analogy brought up by the authors of the study regarding the organization of local church communities and the functioning of non-governmental organizations (a term used for the first time in the USA, in the middle of the 20th century). In support of this finding, the following common elements are highlighted: the orientation towards helping; focusing on the organization itself and lack of rivalry; minimizing financial targets and leaning towards the mission; community for the community; volunteering and the importance of the leader. A marketing and PR (public relations) approach has been proposed to the Western Church since the

37   Lukasz Sulkowski, Grzegorz Ignatowski, Robert Seliga, "Public Relations in the Perspective of the Catholic Church in Poland", *Religions* 13, 115 (2022), https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/13/2/115 (20.02.2023).

60s, especially in the Protestant and later Catholic environment, with applicability, especially in their missionary plan.

5   Points of conjunction in the evangelical missionary activity of the Church: instruments, masks, orality

Preaching the message of Holy Scripture, of its permanent relevance, is part of the missionary activity of the Church, because "*the farmer sows the word*" (Mark 4, 14). The time that passed under the work of the Holy Spirit descended at Pentecost was also marked by the imprint of man's work in history. The Christian was either a stony place, with thorns, or good ground, but in front of God, the person's freedom to choose good or evil was always valued, which is why the personal way in which man perceived and understood God's message is an essential condition for his salvation. To fulfil this desire, the believer in the contemporary society, predominantly technological, encounters new and not easy challenges. The information overload and the rush of digital stimuli risk are seriously compromising our inner balance and generating spiritual voids. According to the exhortation of the Savior Jesus Christ: "*Go into the whole world and preach the Good News to the whole creation*" (Mark 16, 15), the Church has also permanently assumed the role of communicator, which is why it has adapted to the historical context of its mission, as well as to the demands the act of communication. Thus, the glossolalia of the Apostles was the first *modern tool* by which the divine message was adapted to the specific requirements of an era. The activity of Saint Paul the Apostle in Athens also represented the first telling proof of the firm penetration of the Christian message in a community diversified from many points of view. As the reluctance to the new belongs to the specific of the human condition, the apostle of the Messiah did not make a distinctive note of this, because "*his spirit was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols*" (Acts 17, 16). Surely this is also the state that efforts us now when we talk about the challenges and demands of preaching the Gospel in the digital-informational age. However, we must not forget that freedom of choice is accompanied

by our ability to adapt to the context that determines this need for discernment.

It all depends, in fact, on how we make use of the critical spirit with which we are endowed and, above all, on how we integrate ourselves into the natural evolution of the period. Before stepping into *a state of tension*, as an element of novelty often causes us to do, we mustn't damage our condition of being unique and at the same time in communion. A delicate line exists between the two dimensions, and the danger of spiritual failure occurs when "man loses his identity as an individual subject and becomes a solely relational being, characterized mainly by his capacity for social exchange, whose existence is constituted by the communication it operates and whose value is measured only by the degree of complexity of the disclosure"[38].

Communication using digital networks also involves a high degree of putting onto the stage, which reminds us of the controversies of the early Church regarding the foundations of Trinitarian theology, especially those regarding the Greek πρόσωπον (face, *mask of an actor)* and its Latin equivalent *persona*. These terms, which do not come from the writings of Holy Scripture, were loaded by the Holy Fathers with theological meanings, to designate the persons of the Holy Trinity, together with οὐσία (essence, being) and ὑπόστασις (foundation, substance). To bring the presented aspects to the contemporary actuality of the online person and how one creates his image using social networks, we will recall from the perspective approached by the German pastor Ralf Peter Reimann regarding the *mask* we are supposed to use when we manifest ourselves in the digital environment. R.P. Reimann believes that *the digital theatrical act* staged by the users of social networks does not imply an alterity of oneself because the spectators are also people who go through the same *ritual* of communication, adapted to the specific demands of the online environment. The aspect of the presented

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[38] Jean-Claude LARCHET, *Captivi în internet* (Bucureşti: Sophia Publishing House, 2018), pp. 116-117.

context results from the degree of control that the online re-vealer has over the situation. About this, the German pastor says: "I stage myself as a person, consciously or unconsciously. In social media, the rule is that one should not behave any differently than in other contexts. If I do this, then my person meets other people on the Internet. Staging does not lead to something fake but to a personal meeting"[39]. However, the aspects related to the formation of the individual's identity in the online environment, a dynamic process, nevertheless, are grounded on a profound development when we talk about how the realities of the present have been generated. From this perspective, we should not, for example, ignore the current opportunity to use, in the digital act of staging, non-verbal communication. Through gestures, clothes, tone of speech and facial expression, a person can influence his interlocutor and create (voluntarily or involuntarily) a digital *mask*, his online portrait. Not long ago, however, that exposure was text-based, as "written text or coded commands became the primary means of expressing and interpreting one's own and others' identities. Usernames or signatures were, for example, used as tools to present oneself in email lists and newsgroups"[40].

The transition from the era of printing to the digital era can be viewed also from a philosophical perspective, corroborated by the semiotic-linguistic aspect of the transformation process, a particularity that also applies to the specificity of the transmission of the religious message. The American priest and teacher Walter J. Ong introduces two concepts in this sense: *orality* and *literacy*, closely related to the ability to memorize and the way it can be altered once *the primary transition* takes place. To support his thesis, Professor WJ Ong brings up the words of Plato in *Phaedrus*: "For writing will bring with it forgetfulness in the

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[39] Ralf Peter REIMANN, "Uncharted Territories: The Challenges of Digitalization and Social Media for Church and Society", *The Ecumenical Review*, 69.1 (2017), p. 75.

[40] Heidi A. CAMPBELL / Ruth TSURIA (editors), *Digital Religion. Understanding Religious Practice in Digital Media* (London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2022), p. 58.

souls of those who will learn it, making their memory lazy; putting their faith in writing, people will remember from the outside, with the help of foreign icons, and not from the inside, by their own account. The cure that you have found is not designed to speed up memory, but only to recall"[41]. Reviewing W.J. Ong's research, Professor Stephen D. O'Leary of the School of Communication Sciences and Journalism at the University of Southern California states: "It is therefore not surprising that we find speech figuring prominently in the myths and religious practices of primarily oral cultures, which often attach magical significance to the spoken word, or that, lacking the concept of the written record, such cultures rely on expanded powers of memory to preserve their mythic heritage and a record of past events. As chirographic literacy spread through Western culture, sight and textuality were privileged over sound and speech, and the composition of sacred books transformed ancient oral narratives by fixing them into a text that could be consulted and interpreted in a way that was not possible before the invention of writing"[42]. But this does not mean that memorization lost its primary importance with the use of writing, until the advent of printing. Here, we can fit the preliminary stage of the transition from orality to literacy. Important for understanding the future implications are other words of Plato: "The brain is the one that gives us sensations, hearing, sight, smell, from which memory and opinion would then come"[43]. We mention the senses again because they overwhelmingly facilitate the reception of the message in digital communication, the text being the most disadvantaged in this regard. We thus arrive at *secondary orality*, i.e. telephones, radio and television, which are dependent on the stage of literacy

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[41] PLATON, *Phaidros*, trad. Gabriel Liiceanu (Bucharest: Humanitas Publishing House, 2011), p. 126.

[42] Stephen D. O'LEARY, "Cyberspace as Sacred Space: Communicating Religion on Computer Networks", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 4 (1996), p. 784.

[43] PLATON, *Phaidon*, trad. Petru Creția (București: Humanitas Publishing House, 2011), p. 108.

and printing to exist. Now we can better understand the difference between the two meanings of orality as presented by W.J. Ong: "I style the orality of a culture untouched by any knowledge of writing or print, *primary orality.* It is primarily by contrast with *the secondary orality* of present-day high-technology culture, in which a new orality is sustained by telephone, radio, television, and other electronic devices that depend for their existence and functioning on writing and print. Today primary oral culture in the strict sense hardly exists, since every culture knows about writing and has some experience of its effects. Still, to varying degrees, many cultures and subcultures, even in a high-technology ambience, preserve much of the mindset of primary orality"[44]. Starting from this statement, Stephen D. O'Leary devotes a complex study to how the digital continent will be able to generate profound consequences for religious faith and practice. We retain only one of them, of specific interest for the present study, *the separation* between textual and visual, respectively *literacy* and *sensory*, with a return to the accent placed on sound, voice, image and music. Thus, the participatory mystique and sense of community are undergoing a new process of transformation, with a focus on the present moment – a defining feature of online life. The devaluation of the printed word in front of the momentum of the image is potentiated by the dilution of the concept of communion concerning the online community.

6   The first steps of the Church in the "Digital Areopagus"

The positioning of the Romanian Orthodox Church regarding the digitalization of communication was expressed by Patriarch Daniel as early as 2015: "The word of the Lord Jesus Christ «*Go into the whole world and preach the Good News to the whole creation*» (Mark 16, 15) today also extends to the cultural and informative universe. Consistent with the missionary zeal of the

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[44]   Walter J. ONG , *Orality and Literacy* (London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), p. 11.

Holy Apostles and Holly Fathers of the Church we must under-
stand how society works with modern information for to use
with judgement the means of communication to expose the val-
ues of Orthodoxy and to enter the social networks for the meet-
ing with today's man, *a* user of new communication technologies
in the Areopagus of modernity"[45]. The Church must be with its
Christians, regardless of where they are found, along with the
understandable requirement to be contemporary with their
needs and experiences. Christ is everywhere, and His servants
cannot ignore the cries of fellow man, regardless of the environ-
ment they come from, because these are missionary calls to
which, sometimes, we need to make additional efforts to adapt
and assume, to descend into unknown depths, because there we
find many fish.

In recent years, there have been two international events of ma-
jor importance regarding the attitude of the Orthodox Church to-
wards the phenomenon of online communication, namely *The
First International Conference on Digital Media and Orthodox Pas-
toral Care*, which took place in Athens, May 7-9, 2015, and *The
Second International Conference on Digital Media and Orthodox
Pastoral Care*, held at the Orthodox Academy of Crete, June 18th-
21st, 2018. The two dialogue sessions, attended by specialists
from various fields, from the entire Orthodox world, came as a
welcome response of the Church to the magnitude of enjoying
the digital phenomenon, with all its social and individual impli-
cations.

The first conference of the Orthodox Church was attended by 72
speakers from 21 countries, bishops, hieromonks, priests, dea-
cons, monks, nuns, academics, university professors, legal ex-

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[45] Message sent by Blessed Father Daniel, Patriarch of the Romanian
     Orthodox Church, on the occasion of *The First International Conference
     on Digital Media and Orthodox Pastoral Care 2015*,
     https://ziarullumina.ro/actualitate-religioasa/stiri/o-comunicare-
     mai-ampla-pentru-o-misiune-mai-dinamica-101417.html
     (23.02.2023).

perts and specialists in the use of the Internet. The works focused on the use of the Internet, considered – rightly – a great achievement of humankind. A balanced approach has been attempted regarding the two aspects that the online environment offers (as well as any other fact of our lives, for that matter), that of efficient use and that of imprudent use. Side effects such as those that reflect on the user's personality, the fragmentation of the individual consciousness and the decrease of the time allocated to the personal relationship with God, along with self-isolation and the breaking of the relationship with friends, are considered alarm signals that further make the Orthodox Church responsible towards its believers. The positive role of digital technologies facilitates the educational process, help in the workplace, ease communication with those at a distance, strengthen interpersonal relationships, etc. All these, however, also have a deeper effect, which manifests itself through the progressive redefining of some paradigms of reporting to ourselves and our fellow man; the first contact with these realities translates into the mostly categorical attitudes of digital users: their approach either leads to addiction and abuse, taken to the point of anguish, or to a radical reluctance, which comes from conservatism or the very lack of training in the field. Both are to be avoided, the middle path being the preferable one.

Participants at the conference in Athens believed that over time and through active involvement of the Orthodox Church, a harmonization of the preaching of the word of the Gospel including through the new communication channel of the virtual space will be achieved. The closing word is edifying: "The Internet has evolved outside the Church, so it was to be expected that some sort of disconcertion would be expressed as regards how it is to be understood and its appropriate use. This, however, does not impede at all modern Orthodox thinking, which seeks to exploit the Internet's potential, to enlist it successfully into the forces of

its activities and to sanctify it, as far as this can be managed, for the glory of the Triune God"[46].

The second conference of the Orthodox Church on pastoral care issues in the digital environment took place in Crete and bene- fited from the involvement of 107 speakers, from 17 countries, who continued to strengthen the foundation laid three years ago, in Athens. The emphasis was placed on the essential role of the Church for catechesis and religious education, in the context of the demands of the digital age. As highlighted by the Holy and Great Synod - also met in Crete, in 2016 - the Church's concern was also directed at the new way of life that is gradually impos- ing itself in the world, characterized by consumerism and the loss of Christian values, with clear effects that conduct nations to "the loss of their spiritual roots, of their historical memory and to the forgetting of traditions"[47]. Young people were at the core of concern of the lay and clerical participants, both as a vulnera- ble category of this transition and as a living heritage of the Church of the future, towards which the responsibility is in- creased. Faced with this challenge, it was appreciated that "col- laboration with the family and priest is essential, as it is the Church's particular concern with religious education. Interesting suggestions were made regarding the use of digital technology to create favourable psycho-educational conditions for assisting young people to understand and accept the central concepts of life in Christ"[48].

At the same time, topics related to the possibility of using adver- tising by the Church or expanding the practice of fasting (as an

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[46] See *International Association of Digital Media and Orthodox Pastoral Care, Conclusions of the 1st International Conference on Digital Media and Orthodox Pastoral Care-DMOPC15*, https://dmopc.org/?p=2167 (23.02.2023).

[47] *Documentele oficiale ale Sfântului şi Marelui Sinod, Creta, 2016* (Bucureşti: Basilica Publishing House, 2019), p. 66.

[48] See *International Association of Digital Media and Orthodox Pastoral Care, Conclusions of the 2nd International Conference on Digital Media and Orthodox Pastoral Care-DMOPC18*, https://dmopc.org/?p=2170 (23.02.2023).

exercise in self-restraint and self-control) over digital devices, factors that distract the faithful from spiritual matters, were discussed. The verity that the Internet allows instant and easy access for users to messages with an impact that can be distorting or associated with false religious content, as well as cases of using the screen of religion by some organizations or individuals with questionable or purely personal goals, also depicts dangers arising from accessing digital environments. In these cases, the Orthodox Church must have a firm and organized attitude, to protect its believers that use these instruments of information, but also to make its missionary work more efficient. Broadcasting religious processions must also be subject to organized rigours, by protecting the spiritual message from the danger of consumerism. In this sense, the initiative to develop a unitary code of ecclesiastical practices, as well as the establishment of a Central Agency to coordinate the Orthodox digital and pastoral media in a unitary manner, were considered welcome[49]. In the mat-

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[49]   The Association established following the two conferences is called International Association of Digital Media and Orthodox Pastoral Care. Its memorandum of establishing sets out the following main objectives: 1) to link publishers who are active world-wide in the production of Christian Orthodox content on the Internet (active web pages, tablet or smartphone apps, video documentaries, films etc.) as owners or administrators. 2) to link specialist scientists, academics and everyday labourers of the divine word in a distinctive presence in the digital realm. 3) to coordinate the efforts of Orthodox digital media towards a more effective articulation of the Gospel word for the glory of God among users of this media, as well as to make a common, coordinated effort to spread the values of the Orthodox Christian tradition towards all people of good will. 4) to promote the work of the Christian Orthodox in the field of pastoral care in the digital media, to highlight the force of the Christian Orthodox presence and to develop Christian Orthodox discourse in cyberspace. 5) to formulate studies on the qualitative characteristics of the use of the Internet, its divergence from traditional methods of Church pastoral care, the new view of humankind it provides, and the pastoral opportunities it offers, as well as the negative aspects which arise. 6) to promote the values of Christian Orthodox publishers

ter of using digital biblical and exegetical material, it was recommended to preserve traditional methods, due to their practicality.

The individual, a living being present in history, was always at the centre of the theological debate of the conference. Excessive virtualization or digitization of the religious message and practices can favour not only the distortion of the higher senses of the spiritual man but the very human nature of the individual, the ontological structure of the believer, defined by the Church in the image and likeness of God. The man, subject to the contemporary process of globalization in communication, cannot be identified at all with the status of a virtual being, a link of the digital chain. The Sacrament of Confession remains within the Church and should not be confused or associated with the alternative for priests in offering spiritual advice online, through broadcasts or conferences.

Conclusions

In our study, we've investigated, first, the intricate intersection of science, technology, and society, and the multifaceted impact of digitalization on contemporary life. The synthesis emphasized the importance of digital competence, acknowledging its role in shaping a future where critical awareness takes precedence. As we reflect on these scientific findings, our collective responsibility emerges – to engage thoughtfully with technology, advocating

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who are active on the Internet, utilizing digital media, as far as is possible, for the dissemination of the divine word, Patristic tradition and Christian Orthodox theology. 7) to organize conferences and cultural events, exhibitions and other spiritual and artistic occasions. 8) to engage in any related activity. See International Association of Digital Media and Orthodox Pastoral Care, *Conclusions of the 2nd International Conference on Digital Media and Orthodox Pastoral Care-DMOPC18*, https://dmopc.org/?p=2170 (09.03.2023).

for policies that prioritize mental health and fostering digital fluency.

Turning our focus to the realm of religion and media, we've witnessed the proactive stance of the Romanian Orthodox Church in adapting to the digital age. Our exploration encompassed international conferences addressing the challenges and opportunities presented by the digital phenomenon. The research sheds light on the Church's role in catechesis, emphasizing collaboration with families and spiritual guides. We've covered the delicate balance required in adapting religious communication to the digital era, recognizing the challenges faced by journalists in covering religious topics. As we absorb these insights, a shared understanding surfaces – the need for adaptive strategies in religious communication, considering societal dynamics and evolving media landscapes.

Our research has led us to three key scientific conclusions based on the university studies we've encountered throughout our approach. First, our understanding of the digital hazards dominating society, including addiction, privacy risks, and the overwhelming growth of digital information, has underscored the pressing need to address these issues collectively. Without limiting to only what is referred to in this study, we've found consensus in scientific research, particularly in studies conducted by researchers from Erasmus University in Rotterdam, which engaged over a million respondents. The conclusion is that excessive internet use, especially among certain demographics, can have detrimental effects on happiness. This insight prompts us to advocate for targeted interventions and policies to safeguard mental well-being in the age of digitalization.

Turning our attention to the anthropological perspective on happiness, drawing from Professor Neil Thin's study, we've uncovered a profound insight – displaying happiness through digital media may offer only a fleeting and artificial form of contentment. This revelation gains strength from a broader discussion on social media's impact on happiness, especially among the youth, as highlighted in Professor Daniel Miller's study. As we reflect on these nuances, it becomes apparent that cultivating a

deeper understanding of happiness in the digital context is crucial. We, as individuals navigating this digital landscape, can contribute to promoting healthier practices.

Lastly, our exploration of the European Union's study on the impact of the Internet and social networks on young people has illuminated the concept of digital competence. The personal takeaway is clear: Digital fluency, encompassing technical skills, effective technology use, critical evaluation, and motivation to engage in digital culture, is increasingly vital. This conclusion resonates with broader trends in education and professional development, urging us to embrace a holistic approach that nurtures not just technical expertise but also critical thinking and a nuanced comprehension of digital culture.

The extensive discussions encompassed the challenges and opportunities presented by digital media, the Romanian Orthodox Church's proactive stance in adapting to modern communication technologies, the intricate relationship between mass media, journalism, and religion, and the profound implications of the digital age on the Church's missionary activity. The challenges faced by journalists in covering religious topics and the impact of media framing on public opinion underscore the importance of adapting religious communication to the digital age. The engagement of the Orthodox Church in international conferences on digital media and pastoral care signifies a step forward in understanding and harnessing the potential of the digital phenomenon for effective Gospel preaching.

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