ONLINE AND OFFLINE COMMUNITIES COMMUNICATION AS PART OF RELIGIOUS LIVING

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Abstract

Communication is nowadays significantly shaped and determined by social networks. Their influence can be seen in various fields of human existence, from private sphere throughout professional life and building up contacts up to communities' creation. The influence may vary based on sphere where the social network is used and on its actual usage. Its character differs based on the individual concerned, the society that communicates or the status of the person. This type of communication penetrates the lives and the relations based on various society levels; religion is no an exception. Our paper deals with communication and its role in community building; communities have a common interest, world-view (especially considering their religion). We are interested in social networks usage related to religion and worshiping. Communication via social networks is nowadays done by parishes, religious communities, and the Pope Francis I, as the highest representative in religious hierarchy, is no exception, too. This paper deals with possibilities and means as well as the real essence of social networks usage by religious communities and groups, as well as possible uses of social networks for the purpose of faith or worldview spreading.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, the Internet is a synonym of connection forming and communication. It represents the ability of communicate, not only in the sense of information exchange but also in the sense of gathering groups of common interests and communities formation [1]. Ever since the Internet became a tool accessible to wide public, the professionals and academics started to refer to it and 'cyber culture' as an extraordinary pattern of attitudes, existence and belief in online environment [2]. As the individuals exist in digital environment, we may refer to this phenomenon as digital culture. Digital culture has significant impact on everyday lives of individuals. It happens quite often that people look for an escape, a way how to avoid their real life problems or social reality by evading into online environment and virtual reality [3]. The Internet enables us to communicate with no time or space limitations thanks to various applications and

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programs, it gives us the possibility to create our own identity, to share opinions, attitudes, to get or provide information, to buy and sell products and services [4]. Currently, the leading social networks are the ones that enable people to interact, to build relations among their users from different backgrounds. This inevitably leads to multiplication of societies in online environment. An important outcome of these structures is that a great deal of information is generated.

In the last decade, many authors have studied the relationship in between social networks and religion; given the fact, the field of study is not new. Lim and Putnam noted that "social networks serve us as important proves of social and participative mechanisms influencing the impact of religion on life satisfaction" [5]. Dawson and Cowan differentiate in between two term: "religion online" and "online religion" [6]. The prior they perceive as getting to know information and searching for information about religion on the Internet and the latter as religion related experience or praxis in the Internet environment or via the Internet [6, 7]. The research of Paul McClure [8], a sociologist from Baylor University, confirms that there is a strong influence of online technologies and similar means of communication on one's religious belief.

2. Social networks as a common means of today's communication

Currently, the Internet became a strong communication tool. According to Gálik [9], the Internet enables totally new forms of communication, among these, the so-called network communication that prioritizes associative thinking to discourse thinking. An important attribute of this kind of communication is its speed that approaches the speed of light. This is also the reasons why some users perceive it to be immediate. The influence of the speed is significant especially in regards to real life changes in communication of information, in marketing or in other fields of human existence. An important attribute of the internet communication is the predominance of images. This is why we refer to it primarily as to imagery communication (by means of photographs, videos and sharing these). Given the fact that the speed of communication is really high, this form of communication seems to be easily accessible and faster. The Internet has a significant influence on the language, too. New terms are created and an immense penetration of English language into other languages can be perceived. This is due to the fact that English happened to be the primary language of online communication and the cradle of digital technologies terminology. Visibly, new technology has formed a totally new terminology.

Social networks have become an integrated part of one's life in the Internet environment. An individual relies on it for any possible need such as: new information (daily news, information newscast, information about entertainment), events, family and friends gatherings, reviews and ranking of products, shopping decision making, reviews and summaries of services and places, emotional needs fulfilment, managing the workplace and workplace communication, following fashion trends, common daily communication, etc. Speaking of social networks, we mean Facebook, QZone, YouTube, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Instagram and others

(Figure 1). Social networks are driven by user generated content and are highly influential in numerous fields, from purchase/sale, behaviour, entrepreneurship to political affairs and other field of human interest [10].
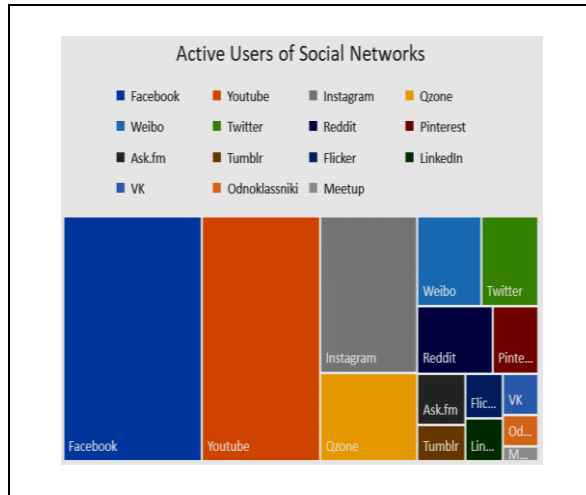

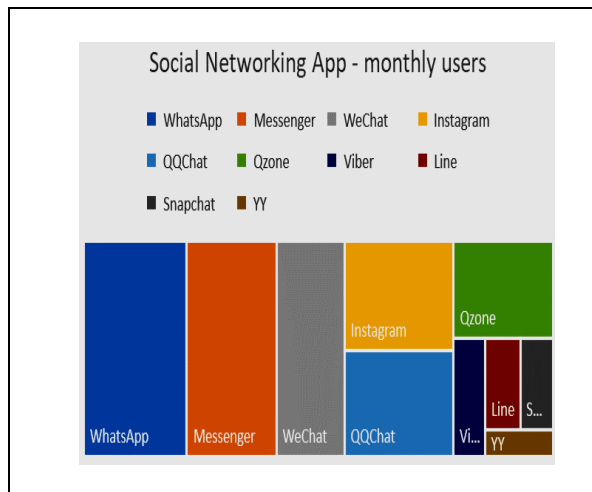**Figure 1.** The most popular social networks. Source: own processing by https://www.dr eam grow.com/top-15-most-popular-social-networking-sites/.

Figure 2. The most popular networking App, Source: own processing by https://www. dreamgrow.com/top-15-most-popular-social-networking-sites/

It is obvious that new technology can improve religious practices by means of enlarging and creating religious communities [11]. On the other hand, individuals nowadays spend more and more of their time on social networks. This increases the possibility that they will get to know information about other religions and all kinds of secular affaires. The mobility of individuals has increased as the modernization process has developed. An individual is able to travel long distance, to think about religious and spiritual engagement, to re-

consider several possibilities of various price and significance. A person has more options to choose based on one's individual preferences [12].

We have to mention that the number of active social networks user increases and it is obvious that the number of users who are believers increases, too. No matter that the statistics show also those people who are still resistant to such networks usage.

There are two main groups of different attitudes among the Christian community. The first one has welcomed the Internet as new means of communication and exchange, as a new way of how lead one's knowledge about the world and people around them to perfection. The other group perceived online environment and various possibilities of online communication as an electronic chaos in which a meaningful communication gets lost in an anarchic pluralism [13]. The graph in Figure 1 shows the number of active social network users and the number of applications worldwide. We may claim that the real social networks leaders are Facebook, Youtube and Instagram.

The most popular networking App are Whatsapp, Messenger and WeChat, as can be seen in Figure 2.

In regards to increasing number of social networks users, we have to mention the results of another research [https://www.pewforum.org/2014/11/06/religion-and-electronic-media/] that proved that one in five Americans share their religious belief in online environment. Approximately the same percentage of people listens to radio (20%), watch TV programs (23%) or listen to Christian rock music (19%). According to the data from the same research, half of the respondents claimed that during their regular workday, they acknowledge somebody who shares their religious belief and related posts in online environment or via social networks.

3. Online vs. offline community in religion of the 21st century

As said the present paper deals with the importance of religious communities in online environment. The question is what it means, when we refer to a community or a society. The antagonists of the Internet define a community as certain relationship formed on the basis of physical space. In such a case, the relationships among the community (society) members are based on face to face communication. Groothuis claims that the Internet helps so-called 'cocooning' [13]. It is a phenomena referring to individuals who communicate in the online environment, isolated from the others in their private space instead of spending time with their children, getting in touch with neighbours or physically present at any event of no matter what character. They prefer online activities and building the virtual community.

Stephen O'Leary [14], a religious scholar and communication guru, is one of the first scientists who analysed the role of new media in religious societies and he declared that the invention of Internet was as much revolutionary for religion growth and spreading as the book-printing. A recent research of Heidi Campbell concerning the choose of Christian organizations, shows that people become part

of online societies to apprehend 'the sacrament' and not only to get information [15]. The Pope Francis has recently shown a clear standpoint towards communities. The pope stressed the importance of communities at World Day of Social Communications 2019. He stated that from anthropological point of view "the metaphor of a network resembles another meaningful imagery: 'a society'" [L. O'Kane, *Pope highlights pros and cons of internet and social media use*, http s://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2019-01/pope-highlights-pros-and-cons-of -intern et-and-social-media-use.html]. On the other hand, the Pope recognizes the negatives of social networks too, as he says that in positive sense, the community becomes a society that can profit from mutual understanding and dialogue. The Pope also stated that "nowadays, communities of social networks are not automatically a synonym for society" [L. O'Kane, *Pope highlights pros and cons of internet and social media use*]. We can see the immense difference in between what the social networks can be and what they actually are not. This fact is related to strong individualism of people and most likely a non-personal character of communication. It may lead to several inconsistencies and misunderstandings. Personal communication is the preferred form of communication of Church or any other religious community. A Christian leader is a strong personality whose strength, credibility and communication has fundaments in intimate communication, both with God and the churchgoers or the community. We may refer to the transfer of personal experience with God's presence by means of words, actions and person's perception of reality [16]. Physical community and virtual community are two different notions that may interfere. The same way as a physical community (a group of people who believe in God and who are building the community together in real life) may interfere with communities in virtual environment. The missions may profit from fast and easy transmission of information via social networks, too. There exists an online missionary who works in online environment and spreads the faith there [16].

In the next chapter, we will have a look at the personality of the Pope Francis who can be easily called an online missionary in wide sense of the term. He is an influential personality for the Christian society who is present online, too. He also is a builder of online as well as offline communities.

4. Pope Francis and his communication on social networks as a basis for strengthening and creating a community

In recent years, the use of digital media has become a means of spreading faith and increasing participation of believers in matters of the Church or spreading faith. This phenomenon is often referred to by scientists as 'digital religion'. However, the research by Golan and Campbell [17] pointed to the ambivalence of religious clergy to new media. Scientists have also explored religious activities, namely, how new media facilitate the spread of religious communities and how they strengthen already existing communities [18]. These many research efforts point at the interest of exploring and the potential of this

research area, i.e. the importance of building up communities with religious focus in the online environment.

We have also focused on the introduction of Pope Francis' Instagram account, Pope Francis' behaviour in the period shortly after his Instagram account introduction (taking into account that he is the main representative of the Catholic Church) [19]. Given the context of this research, it is evident that we speak of a qualitative analysis where the data set was compiled to capture the overall activity of Pope Francis on his Instagram account during the first 16 months since the account was set up (March 20, 2016 – July 23, 2017), 429 images in total [20]. The image material posted on Pope's profile was also analysed by using Dedoose software [21]. A semiotic analysis, i.e. an analysis of texts containing theological information, followed. Its processing was carried out by means of coding, which is described by Golan and Martini in the study and the presentation of research results [21]. The author also provides certain significant results that are beneficial for the study. The data collected was nevertheless confronted with literature dealing with charisma and the distance of leaders from their community members. These methodological processes led to clear results' identification. The communication style of Pope Francis is the one of a leader. The main findings of the research bring results and further findings about the Pope. He keeps distance from other Church members and also from the presentation of Pope as an authority, mostly in the traditional Pope garment. Other Church members are shown relatively little in the contributions (3% of contributions). However, as we deal with communication via social networks – currently accessible to masses- it can be stated that the declared distanceis suppressed by the fact that contributions are presented in online environment. This clearly erases the 'distance' and the Pope is exposed to "the audience" [21].

Another important social networking tool is Twitter. Twitter as a microblog is one of the most powerful tools for sharing information. Its purpose is to link users and publish or receive short texts that are very easily accessible for a wide range of devices and can be supplemented with multimedia resources. Twitter fulfils the attributes for instant connectivity, enables its users to discuss matters, and also the interaction between users. Twitter consists of multiple resources and allows quick distribution of content. This makes Twitter a powerful tool for influencing supporters and strengthening or gaining leadership [19].

Castells argues that nowadays, the more leaders use new technologies, the more they can expand their own influence. Thus, technology has become an indispensable tool to strengthen and achieve this impact, especially when binding generations together is expected to be the result [22]. The use of the Internet as a communication medium (in particular, through social networks) by prominent church leaders means that digital culture and technology often constitute of bridging and/or spreading online religious practices and space into offline religious contexts. Cheong, Huang, and Poon came with further research into the area, exploring the paradox of religious authority in online environment [23]. Why are we talking about the authority in this context then? There is a need to discuss the premise of how new religious authorities (especially religious leaders

and structures) can be weakened by the growth of new religious superiors in online environment. The Internet environment creates the space for seeking alternative information leaders as well as personal leaders. On the other hand, if the Church representative is active in social networking, the influence of the spiritual leader is strengthened and enhanced by affirming their teachings and religious knowledge and by giving daily testimony through Twitter, Facebook or Instagram. Studies on digital religion focus on thorough examination of how digital religion is suppressed by the signs of online culture (such as interactivity, convergence, etc.) and those of traditional religion (such as beliefs and rituals associated with historically based communities) along with implications of this interplay. Campbell and Hutchings deal with this issue, documenting trends in creating various Christian communities in online environment. Many of these online communities had no counterpart existing in offline environment as there was no real physical community. Of particular interest is the research and subsequent analysis of Hutchings, which looked at possible impact of digital technologies on building physically existing communities and their impact on participation in worship and Bible study.

5. Conclusions

At present, there are several opinions and approaches of professionals or general public and the believers themselves towards social networks. It can be stated that there is some kind of polarization in this respect, where one group recognizes and accepts social networks, and on the other hand, there is another group of society that is only getting used to social networks but at the same time refuses to get used to them. The same approaches to the creation of communities and perception of both physical and virtual communities have been observed by various authors. There are approaches that welcome the existence of virtual communities as a complement to physically existing communities. However, on the other hand, there are opinions of those who prefer personal contact and real relationships based on meeting with each other. Only the future will show whether, with the weakening influence of some churches, these will not reach for as powerful tool as the social networks definitely are. There arises a corresponding question on whether and how the active believers perceive the possibilities of this offline and online operation of communities in relation to virtual reality.

Acknowledgement

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