Babeș-Bolyai University

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DIGITAL ACTIVISM AND RELIGIOUS VALUES
EXPLAINING WHY ORTHO-BLOGGERS POST ONLINE

Summary

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Content

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Summary

The recent expansion of the Internet accelerate the global resurgence of religion (Campbell, 2013; Campbell and Evolvi, 2020). This is reflected in the growing importance of religious beliefs, practices and discourses in personal and public life and in the role of individuals, non-state actors, communities and religious or religion-related organizations (Thomas, 2005). In this context, new religious actors such as the Ortho-bloggers, emerge. They are small groups of individuals who share the same norms and values and whose online activity focuses on spiritual life, moral values and activity of the Orthodox clergy and Church. They provide a new social infrastructure to practice religion and recruit followers in a new 'spiritual market' online (Palfrey *et al.*, 2010; Suslov and Kotkina, 2015; Zijderveld, 2017; Zasanska, 2019). Through their blogs, the Ortho-bloggers often discuss and comment on topics related to social, economic and international politics. While earlier research covers extensively the evolution of religion online (Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai, 2005; Campbell, 2013; Garner, 2013; Golan, 2013), the relevance of this study is given by the novelty of the Ortho-blogging phenomenon that has gained momentum in the last two decades, against the background of the resurgence of the religious factor at the global level and globalization (Thomas 2005).

Considering the conceptual approaches of the religions-Internet relationship, some define religious activities that take place in the online environment either in an institutionally organized form (the activity of Churches, Temples, and Mosques)(Hutchings 2017) or in the form of religious manifestation of believers. The concept of digital religion "describes the technological and cultural space that is evoked when we talk about how online and religious spheres have blended" (H. A. Campbell 2013a, 3–4). Brasher (2001) understands religious activity online through the concept of 'cyber-religion' while Hogan and Wellman (2011) and Helland (2016) highlight the connection between religion and the online environment as a form of 'networked religion'. Another approach to online religious activities has highlighted the relationship between the concepts of 'religion-online' and 'online-religion'. While religion online content provides organizational information, online religious content, for example, allows users to engage in spiritual activity via online communication platforms (Helland 2016). Of particular importance for this study is the concept of 'Digital Orthodoxy', a new and underdeveloped approach that addresses a particular part of 'Digital Religion'. It may broadly be defined as the Orthodox religion's approach toward the 'domestication' of digital technologies and social media.

Although many individuals practice Ortho-blogging at an institutionalized and non-institutionalized level as some previous research points (Zasanska 2019; Suslov and Kotkina 2015), very little is known about them. More precisely, the motivations for which these people do what they do are not known in the first place. Also, there is very little knowledge on how Orthodox religious bloggers mediate through digital technologies the relationship between offline and online Faith. Finally, very little information is known about the implications of the activities of this new type of religious actor both in relation to society in general, but especially in relation to the institutional activity of the offline Church and the manifestation of religiosity in post-modern societies. In this regard, the current study located at the intersection of several fields such as Political Sciences, Orthodox Theology, Communication, Digital Technologies, and Security Studies tries to provide an answer regarding the motivations of Ortho-bloggers, highlighting at the same time features that address the wider implications of Orthodox bloggers' activity.

This thesis addresses this gaps in the literature and aims to explain why the Ortho-bloggers post online. It seeks to understand if the decision to write on blogs is determined by personal beliefs, by reactions to the institutional limitations of the Church or by broader societal issues. The analysis focuses on Romania, due to the fact that it is a country with Orthodox majority population, good Internet infrastructure and a very active Orthodox Church in society and online. Since the studies about the activity of Ortho-bloggers are limited, my analytical framework builds on several strands of literature such as religious bloggers, bloggers and blogging in general and the functioning and structure of the Internet. The thesis tests the effects of three major categories of determinants (individual, institutional and systemic) on the decision to write online. To this end, it propose a qualitative analysis that draws on the one hand on semi-structured interviews conducted with Ortho-bloggers in June-July 2021 and October-November 2021, and on the other hand on documents (Ortho-blogs and institutional ones from Romanian Orthodox Church, EU, and Romanian Government). Rregarding the method of analysis, this study uses deductive thematic analysis to interpret the answers to interviews. This method is suitable for the study of the motivations of Orthodox religious bloggers, as it allows the identification of common themes in relation to the analytical framework, offering at the same time several ways to interpret the data (Nowell et al. 2017).

The results confirm, nuance and complete the previous findings regarding the motivations of religious bloggers to carry out their activity within the online environment. Thus, there are some key contributions that this study brings forward. First of all, it illustrates the fact that the digitalization of religious activities within the Orthodox Faith goes beyond the

institutional framework of the Church, thus contrasting what the few existing studies on 'Digital Orthodoxy' suggested (Suslov and Kotkina 2015; Zasanska 2019; Suslov 2016). Secondly, the present study highlights how 'religion-online' and 'online-religion' (Helland 2016a; Frost and Youngblood 2014) adapted themselves in terms of just a presentation of religion or practical commitment within a particular digital third space as it is the Romanian Ortho-sphere. The findings of this study show that Ortho-bloggers and the religious communities they manage online tend to carry out their activities both as a complement and challenge towards the offline communities. Finally, as a third strand of contribution, the technological specifications of web 2.0 and different social media platforms also show how digital technology uphold to the personification and even alteration of the Faith online.

Three key features are emphasized as to be kept in mind when explaining why Ortho-bloggers in Romania post, focusing on their profile as religious actors and their place within the religious activities in the Romanian digital environment. First, Ortho-bloggers - despite their label - are not exclusively characterized by religiosity and do not express an exclusive manifestation of the Faith throughout their activities online. The second major characteristic suggests that, within the Romanian Orthodox Church, Ortho-bloggers act as independent normative authorities in a wider process of digitalization of religious activities and the Orthodox Faith. The last feature underlines the digital activism of Orthodox religious blogging from the perspective of the forms, opportunities, and threats it implies.

From a theoretical point of view, the study of the motivations of Orthodox bloggers emphasizes two major issues: 1) how themes already established in the literature, regarding the activity of religious bloggers and bloggers in general, are related to Ortho-bloggers in Romania and 2) The conceptual evolution of 'Digital Orthodoxy' and 'Ortho-blogger/Ortho-blog'. From the perspective of the methodological component, studying the motivations of Orthodox religious bloggers offers new approaches related to case selection and the particularities of a new data set focused on non-institutionalized Ortho-bloggers and Ortho-bloggers. Finally, the thesis contributes empirically to the general study of the relationship between religion, communication and new digital technologies, security studies, and political science by focusing on an online religious group less studied in the religious studies literature: Orthodox bloggers.