



# Russian Orthodox Church and New Media: To Be or Pretend to Be? (Conference Overview)

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*Abstract:* This paper is a survey of the roundtable discussion at the Russian Orthodox University (Moscow). The debates among Orthodox journalists, academics and clerics of the Russian Orthodox Church were centered on ‘pros’ and ‘cons’ of using the new media for the purpose of the Church mission. In particular, they raised questions of the most successful forms of engaging with the internet, such as blogging and maintaining information websites. Conference participants discussed ethical issues, such as anonymity, pertaining to the presence of the priest in the digital environment.

*Keywords:* Russian Orthodox Church, Runet, Church mission, blogging priests

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A roundtable discussion on ‘Russian Orthodox Church and new media: to be or pretend to be?’ was held on 28 January 2014 at the Russian Orthodox University in the framework of the XXII International Christmas Educational Readings. The roundtable discussion was attended by:

- archpriest Pavel Velikanov, the chief editor of the scientific and theological portal Bogoslov.ru, associate professor of the Moscow Theological Academy,
- Anna Danilova, chief editor of the portal Orthodox Christianity and the World [‘Pravoslavie i mir’],
- Elena Zhosul, head of the Department of Journalism and Public Relations of Russian Orthodox University,
- priest Dionysii Zemlianov, head of the information department of the Tomsk eparchy of the Russian Orthodox Church,

- Vladimir Berkhin, President of the Foundation ‘Tradition’,
- Sergey Bolotov, representative of the Synodal Information Department,
- Maria Senchukova, journalist,
- Sergei Khudiev, journalist.

The discussion was moderated by well-known journalist Natalia Loseva. Participants from various dioceses of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), well-known journalists, heads of the internet portals and diocesan press services discussed limits, opportunities and threats of the ROC mission in social networks, the development trends of new media and their influence on the information agenda and the process of evangelization.

### **Social networks: *pro et contra***

The roundtable began with an expert survey on ‘The Social Network for the Orthodox people - good or evil?’ Chief editor of the portal ‘Bogoslov.ru’ archpriest *Pavel Velikanov* mentioned three pros: 1) the possibility of proclaiming Gospel, the ability to communicate with people looking for answers on their questions in social networks; 2) the possibility of Christian charity - according to the priest, ‘charitable organizations are active in networks and live through networks’; and 3) the rapid dissemination of information. Contrary, according to the theologian, are the reverse side of pros: 1) it is very difficult to verify information; it often comes from not trustworthy and strange sources; 2) discussions are conducted in a manner not appropriate for Christians; and 3) people spend a lot of time in the networks and come in the real world ‘just to eat’.

The chief editor of the portal Bogoslov.ru added that anonymity, on the one hand, allows people to overcome the ‘exclusion zone’ between a wide audience and the clergy, while on the other hand, removes moral constraints, and the very possibility to contact a priest is often associated with the desire ‘just to chat’ and not to learn something really important that would lead a person to faith.

Sergey Khudiev believes that it is difficult to divide the ‘pluses’ and ‘minuses’. Most of the advantages are at the same time disadvantages. The subjectivity of publications makes it possible to obtain information not politically correct, but one that reflects the mood of the living. Hence the negative side - you never know the limits of this subjectivity. The opportunity to establish a personal relationship with someone is ‘neutralized’ with the threat that these relations cannot be deep and meaningful. The advantage of anonymity is that many people are able to overcome the exclusion zone between them and the clergy, but the disadvantage is that the question of anonymity removes the limitations of the people in the network: they cease to control what they say.

Anna Danilova considered as a positive the fact that social networks make it possible to get out of the ‘ghetto’ of a merely Orthodox audience; they make it possible to understand the agenda, find out what people are now interested in. However, a negative point is in the lack of information accuracy and difficulties with verification, and sometimes ‘fakes’ rapidly spread via social networks (for example, the news on prohibition of ‘Good night, kids!’ [‘Spokoinoi nochi, malyshi!’] show on TV). Further on the negative side, Danilova has

considered the fact that social networking generates too quick a reaction; 'People react while they still do not really understand the situation, and relationships become strained', Danilova said and referred to general 'internet hygiene.'

Speaking about the advantages, Elena Zhosul noted that social networks 1) are one of the main sources of news; 2) allow the establishment of useful contacts and professional relationships; and 3) allow quick collective reflection about what is happening. At the same time, according to Zhosul, 'in the information space has been a lot of psychology.' On the negative side she mentioned 1) the overflow of information, when 'we are forced to consume, swallow without chewing'; and 2) the inability to concentrate on some issues, therefore long texts are so unpopular in the network.

According to the journalist Maria Sveshnikova, one of the main problems of the Orthodox forums is the level of debate: 'In no other network segments are not allowed such an indecent, offensive communication. Paradox is that priests often write something that they would never say from the pulpit. They discredit themselves and the Orthodox Church'.

Archpriest Pavel Velikanov led a large-scale and very nervous discussion about the document 'Church Slavonic language in the life of the Russian Orthodox Church of the XXI century' ['Tserkovnoslavianskii iazyk v zhizni Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi XXI veka']: 'It was a stream of embittered, irritable mind, when no one was going to talk with anyone about anything.' As a result, the document failed and was not accepted. And then, in 2013, there was another document on the preparation for Holy Communion, which, for an unusually short period of time, stimulated a spike of discussion in social networks to about ten times the usual number of participants. 'We were greatly surprised that people have a desire to speak, understand, discuss, and not just to express their opinion. This is an encouraging trend,' said Velikanov. In his opinion, the discussion about Orthodoxy 'should be placed in the correct space and with properly adjusted brakes - and the process will go well.' In particular, he noted the high level of discussion on the sites bogoslov.ru, pravoslavie.ru and pravmir.ru.

Anna Danilova agreed that Orthodox segments of social networking have 'a culture of constructive criticism.' At the same time, she expressed confidence that the inability to properly lead the discussion is not only an 'Ortho-net' feature, but the characteristic of any virtual community, whether it be a forum of young mothers or anything else. She believes that 'a culture of constructive criticism' will grow, as well as the culture of a public apology. Elena Zhosul recalled that in the Church of England there was recently published a set of rules about how to behave in social networks. Participants noted that the world of social networks is very fragmented, and the Orthodox part of it is not an exception.

Earlier, in an interview, adviser to the chairman of the Synodal Information Department, Head of the Department of Journalism and PR Russian Orthodox University Elena Zhosul, responding to a question about why the Church has developed around the complex information situation, referred to the issue of staff. According to her observations, 'a very substantial part of those who come to work in the Church, almost a third - fanatics, and 50%, if not more - people who in a certain sense are social outsiders.' In addition, there is a strong belief that the Church does not need a PR because PR is something unworthy.

## **The main objectives and successful formats**

‘It is very important that we try to say something good and positive, because there is enough of strain, swearing, shouting, hatred and fear. It is important to perform a creative function, we must strive to find something joyful and positive, especially in the information about people of the Church,’ said Sergei Khudiyev.

Reflecting on what topics are now the most in demand in the interests of the Orthodox internet environment, talking about death, disease, experience of coping with grief; about the Christian understanding of history; of life-affirming stories; about ‘how to live happily in Orthodoxy’.

Natalia Loseva proposed to discuss the most successful formats of communication networks. According to Anna Danilova, if simplification of the form does not lead to a simplification of the content, the format is a good one: ‘The main thing - do not do the mission for the mission itself, there stood up and prayed. The picture of three monks who stood in Kiev between ‘Berkut’ and the opposition has collected 50,000 likes in two days.’

‘As a producer, journalist and PR expert I know very well how to make website popular, how to develop and promote it. But Christians have in this sense more restrictions than the nonbelievers,’ suggested Natalia Loseva.

Responding to a question from the representative of the Kuban diocese of whether the new Catechism of the ROC will be discussed online on bogoslov.ru, archpriest Pavel Velikanov said: ‘If our hierarchy deems possible this discussion we would be happy to take it up. But something tells me that it is unlikely to be possible because the Catechism - a special book, which does not presume a broad discussion.’

## **Priests in networks: to what extent it is appropriate?**

A priest from the Astrakhan eparchy, who also participated in the discussion, expressed doubts about the effectiveness of networks for pastoral work: ‘When I was a seminarian, I participated actively in the virtual communication, and when I became a priest and returned to Astrakhan, I realized that the periphery is not interested in social networking. Where it come to the temple through Facebook or V Kontakte - a little, but a lot of cases, when they come through the parish website. Why should the priests be involved in a social network activity?’

Archpriest Pavel Velikanov expressed the belief that the priest must be present in social networks: ‘On the one hand, it is easier to move a person to communicate with the priest, asking him what the Church thinks about different issues, but on the other hand, sometimes a man comes to the network is not in order to come to the Church, but only to chat with the priest.’ He believes that any Orthodox person must have a ‘strong immunity’ to social networks. ‘I think that we will not turn away from social networks’, added Velikanov. He called the Orthodox lifestyle fun, rich, multi-faceted, and recalled that the social network - not just a network of people - is also a technology, which must be learned.

Journalist Maria Senchukova reminded that the Church is an open system, the internet teaches individual responsibility for any position, so each user is responsible himself.

During the discussion, there were calls for moderation of Orthodox segments of social networking in order to prevent the functioning of fake accounts such as ‘Mount Athos’, ‘Starets Amvrosii Optinskii’ et al. ‘I do not call for the establishment of the Holy Orthodox Inquisition, but some moderation is very necessary’, said one of the participants.

There was another call - ‘to wrest the palm of Zuckerberg with his Facebook and create your ‘Orthobook’, which must be moderated.

Archpriest Pavel Velikanov reminded the audience of Christ: ‘We were talking for an hour about what should Orthodox media speak about and what they should not say, and all this time we did not say a word about Christ, but Christ - the most important of what we have, Christ is the only criterion of humanity.’

Summing up, Natalia Loseva noted as ‘pluses’ of the internet 1) the opportunity to reach out to the target audience, 2) the new communication possibilities, 3) the increased speed of information transmission and 4) its volume. ‘People got a huge range of instruments to bring content to promote the idea or to explain something,’ said Loseva. She added that ‘the physical and virtual reality merged, from the virtual world we can not escape anywhere.’

Roundtable discussion participants agreed to continue the dialogue on the new media challenges for Russian Orthodox Church during up-coming conferences.

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