



Orthodox Online Media on Runet: History of Development and Current State of Affairs

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Abstract: The article deals with the history of the Orthodox segment of Runet, tracing its origins and uncovering key tendencies of its development. Specifically, it discusses ‘colonization’ of the internet by the Russian Orthodox Church, emergence of the most important Orthodox information web-portals, and formation of religious online-communities. The author argues that religious organizations in Russia favor the internet over other media channels. Likewise, for the grassroots the internet has become the most important source of the information about the Church and faith.

Keywords: Russian Orthodox Church, Runet, religious webpages

In this paper I offer a descriptive overview of the historical development and the current state of Orthodox online media, grounding on and summing up my previous research (Luchenko 2007: 2009). In my research, I focused on the webpages located in Runet which deal with the issues of Orthodox Church and faith for the period from 1996 until now. For the purpose of this study, the monitoring and content-analysis of 100 most popular webpages has been conducted, supplemented by interviews with key producers of religious content in the digital environment. My findings have been rubricated and codified according to the specially elaborated analytical scheme, which consists of several parameters such as the owner and the founder of the webpage, frequency of updating the content, number of visits per day and others. In this article I argue that Orthodox online media have recently become the most important source of information about religion for Russian Orthodox believers.

Religious organisations favour the internet over other media channels. According to Lorne Dawson, a Canadian scholar of the sociology of religion and an expert in religion and the internet, ‘the interactive potential of computer-mediated communication gives it an ad-

vantage in mediating religious experience over conventional broadcast media' (Dawson 2005: 34).

Russian new media have featured Church topics since the beginning of the 1990s, which were the early days of the internet in Russia. The first Orthodox websites appeared almost immediately after the establishment of the domain zone .RU. The creation and formation of religious portals went in parallel with the rapid growth of the internet itself and with the return of religion to the life of society. While in using traditional mass communication tools, such as radio, TV or print media, religious organizations and communities in Russia always lagged behind society as a whole, within the realm of new media they competed on equal terms, with both sides having started at the same time.

The internet allows for maximum diversification of content and the hierarchical structuring of any number of subjects or any amount of background information needed. That makes the internet the key to overcoming one of the main obstacles that prevents religious organizations from successfully claiming contemporary mass media space: the 'lengthiness' of religious stories for the existing formats. Journalists covering any religion-related event are compelled to make extensive historical and theological digressions, whereas the hyperlinks tool, along with the 'story in process' format of organizing the information, resolves the problem.

The most popular Orthodox portals within Runet can boast 80,000-90,000 unique visitors per day, which exceeds the printed Orthodox media runs by tens of times. Information-wise, the Russian segment of the internet covers just about every aspect of Orthodoxy: daily news, official Church documents, thousands of e-books and catechetical articles. Yet, the development of the new media is making religious communities face questions that they are not yet ready to answer. One should of course bear in mind that the onrush of new communication technologies, whereby solutions become out of date before being implemented, causes problems in many fields: not only journalists and media-managers, but also scientists and economists are constantly looking for ever-new solutions. Year in, year out, the general tone of publications and discussions on the new media and its rapid development is that of a question.

The first thing that comes to mind in relation to religion and the new media is that the internet is, by its nature, based on horizontal ties. And those ties do not stand for merely technical network connections but rather for the social relations, the direct and informal interactions, between millions of users. On the one hand, this horizontal dimension goes against the concept of hierarchy, and that is precisely why those religions that do not have an obvious and rigid structure, e.g., Islam, various New Age movements and numerous Protestant denominations, feel much more at home online than traditional Christian churches. On the other hand, the strengthening of horizontal ties is quite coherent with the notion of community and communality. This is what makes it crucial to consider and understand the role that virtual communities, i.e., first and foremost social networks, play in relation to the real parish communities. Obviously, their borders do not correspond, but many users, especially in regions where the choice of parishes is not so wide, are able to find more close friends online than at the local parish. Some of the online communication platforms have been developing for 15 years or more (e.g., the forum of deacon Andrei Kuraev), with the relations between its participants going back to the very early days of the portal, sometimes flowing out into real life,

but still being based on the online reality. These communities have their own pastors and informal leaders whose authority rests on trust and reputation. There are numerous examples of priests who are not even rectors in their parishes, but rather first or second vicars, or priests living in small villages with no more than 10 parishioners, having several tens of thousands of followers in the social networks for whom their words are of great importance. The converse case is also true: many clerics in high offices and positions remain almost unknown to the internet users, their online authority is merely formal and their opinion is insignificant.

Instead of informational and analytical work, the Russian Orthodox media and religious journalism are generally concerned with publicity and, to a certain degree, with catechism work. Subordination to PR and the corporate tasks of Church administration is one of the key problems of the Orthodox media in Russia, and this has been escalating year on year. That is why such journalism functions as the mediator between the Church and society, giving the floor to all sides of the emerging conflicts, while the tasks of investigating and informing were taken on by so-called civil journalism, i.e., bloggers and social network users. The quality of the latter's publications is certainly lower than that of the professional journalists' work. At the same time, the internet provides a space for manipulation and feeding unverified information to the public. It also allows for an excessive mediatization phenomenon when certain facts or events start an information wave that is inadequate to the real scale of the event or fact. What becomes the focal point of active online discussions sometimes remains an online-only reality, with no outcome in real life and no relation to it whatsoever.

While in Europe and the U.S. such social networks as *LiveJournal* (LJ) or Facebook (FB) are primarily used for private communication with friends, Russia has seen what could be called an 'intellectual social network' phenomenon. Spaces for high-quality and deep socio-political, philosophical and even Church-related discussions appeared first on LJ, then on FB. Why so? The answer to that question is closely linked to the analysis of dialogue culture in Russian society as a whole. Social institutions and mechanisms that are supposed to ensure and sustain that dialogue are overwhelmingly out of order. However, the need to discuss, share experiences and monitor publications is still there. And social networks make it possible.

The first online communications platforms were exceptionally informal and unofficial. But when the community was already formed, it started attracting representatives of the official ecclesiastical structures. The number of private profiles of such officials along with the number of Synodal departments' groups grew steadily. Nowadays, they are not mere participants in some discussions, but even initiators. For example, draft documents of the Inter-Council Office (*Mezhsobornoe prisutstvie*, the main consultative body of the Russian Orthodox Church) were officially discussed on a special LJ blog and on the bogoslov.ru portal. As a result of those discussions, several of the documents prepared by the members of the Presence were either referred back or set aside as an ill-timed proposal. The most heated discussions, with thousands of comments made by professional theologians, users of different educational backgrounds and practical involvement in the matters discussed, authors of the documents and even invited experts from other Local Orthodox Churches, were centred on the draft versions of documents on monasticism, confession, Communion and liturgical use of the Russian language.

Historical survey of the orthodox Runet

The first religion-based Runet sites date from 1996. Fr Andrei Milkin, who holds a degree in computer sciences, created a webpage of the Nizhnii Novgorod diocese. However, the move got no support from the then head of the diocese, Metropolitan Nikolai (Kupetov), and the page was soon closed. Meanwhile, the first ‘homepages’ of Orthodox individuals appeared. On 18 February 1997 the official webpage of the Russian Orthodox Church, created by the Department of External Church Relations, was presented. Its creators were Alexander Bulekov (today – hegumen Filaret) and Timofei Zolotusskii (currently serving as the rector of the Russian Orthodox parish in Reykjavik). In his address to visitors to the webpage, Alexis II, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, mentioned for the first time ever the importance of domestication of the internet for Orthodox believers. On 4 September 1998, the Metaphrasis Information Agency headed by Sergei Chapnin held the first conference entitled ‘Orthodox Internet Resources Today and Tomorrow’ that gathered Orthodox specialists in information technologies and online journalists. There were some 150 Orthodox Runet sites at the time. The first attempt to catalogue them was made in the autumn of 1998, when Viktor Sudarikov compiled an annotated list of links to various Orthodox sites and published it on his webpage (Sudarikov 1998). One third of the sites listed were in fact devoted to culture but included information on Church art and history, Biblical texts and miscellaneous background data.

Out of 100 sites dedicated to the Orthodoxy itself, some 15 belonged to the dioceses and official structures of the Russian Orthodox Church, 12 were online versions of Orthodox periodicals, 10 belonged to small Orthodox libraries, 20 belonged to various schools and non-governmental organizations, and another 20 to parishes and monasteries, while the last 30 were homepages of laymen and clergy.

The first sites were predominantly textual. Back then nobody had a clear understanding of why and how to create a webpage. However, even at that early stage some of the pages were illustrated, for their authors exercised a creative approach and tried to make maximum use of the network potential, including the hypertext structure. Soon afterwards the first question-answer interaction sections appeared. The first high-quality professional projects, e.g., the ‘Russian Orthodoxy database’ (ortho-rus.ru) and the ‘Orthodoxy in Russia’ portal (or.ru¹) appeared in 1998, but are no longer updated. The former included the lives of saints, archives, clergy’s resumés and lots of other data. The latter had a daily-updated news section based on the ITAR TASS (Russian news agency) feed, a Church calendar, an opinion-based journalism section, a catechism section and a glossary. In the same year, the *Sobornost*’ online journal was created as the first mass media completely dedicated to the Orthodoxy.

In those days, Orthodox network projects operated solely on the basis of their creators’ enthusiasm, while the key challenges were the lack of strong links within the community, lack of time and resources, and lack of understanding and support from the hierarchy who were not yet ready to accept the internet as a new and powerful information channel. Indeed, at that time the whole of the Russian internet segment could be called an amateur enterprise.

In 1999, the number of Orthodoxy-oriented webpages reached 300, and all Runet rating and search services had a Religion section introduced with Orthodox sites consistently head-

¹ This site is no longer available, but was archived by archive.org (‘Pravoslavie v Rossii’ 1998).

ing the list. The first attempts to analyze this new communication channel and develop strategies for its usage, first of all for mission purposes, were undertaken in the same period. On 2 February 1999, Viktor Sudarikov, creator of one of the first Orthodox webpages, made a presentation in the historical section at the conference of Saint Tikhon's Orthodox University. In his paper entitled 'Orthodox Mission in the Internet Global Computer Network: Opportunities, Problems, Prospects' he gave the following brief characteristic of the internet as a new missionary space from the Orthodox perspective:

Currently, the internet, as well as the country as a whole, is a missionary territory. As in society in general, most internet users are not churchgoers. There are Orthodox Christians, adherents of various traditions, active atheists, people interested in faith matters, those who are nonbelievers simply because of live far from Russian spiritual centres and not having heard of the Gospel yet, those seduced by various sects and wrongly perceived rationality, as well as those who have left the Church or stopped being interested in it due to the sins of the Orthodox. So there are three ways to make missionary efforts online: 1) by presenting information on the webpage; 2) through participation in open discussions (teleconferences or internet forums); and finally 3) through private correspondence (Sudarikov 1999).

The year 1999 saw the opening of one of the most visited religious sites of Runet, 'A Man and His Faith', the forum of deacon Andrei Kuraev. The first free hosting service for Orthodox pages called 'Orthodox Russia' (orthodoxy.ru) with its Orthodox resources' banner network, was founded the same year. Many monasteries and parishes created business card websites filled with all sorts of information, while the diocesan pages gained diversity. The first conference to gather webmasters and editors of Orthodox webpages took place in 1998, and gave impetus to a series of regular Orthodoxy and Internet seminars in Moscow. Site creators and journalists from Tver', Riazan, Nizhnii Novgorod and the U.S. took part in the June 1999 session of the seminar.

In 2000, the religious internet made a quantitative and qualitative leap, with the milestone marked by the transformation of The Russian Orthodox Church website maintained by the Department of External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, from being merely an official representation to a fully-fledged information resource. Materials of the Jubilee Bishops' Council of 13–16 August 2000 were published on the Department's site in near-real time, whereas their publication in hard copy had to wait for another 18 months after the event. Comments on the Council's decisions were posted in an equally swift manner by the *Sobornost'* online journal, which made a significant contribution towards forming a comprehensive picture of the day by online journalists only. The first online video broadcast of a church service took place on the same occasion: the rite of great consecration of the Christ the Saviour Cathedral was aired on the Cathedral's site xcc.ru. Sretenskii Monastery's online journal pravoslavie.ru ('Pravoslavie 2000' back then) also opened in 2000 to become one of the first online media with religious content.

In September 2000, the Christian Foundations of Economic Ethics scientific online conference was held jointly by the *Sobornost'* journal, the Omsk State University and the Catholic University Eichstätt-Ingolstadt (Germany), attracting theologians, economists, sociologists, priests and journalists. The level of major scientific conferences was successfully

preserved notwithstanding the online format of the event, as evidenced by the participants' responses and the number of mentions of the conference in the printed and online media. The *Sobornost*' journal, together with the Institute of Federalism and Civil Society of the Russian Academy of Science, published the proceedings of the conference both in hard and soft copy.

Key trends of the year 2000 included the growth of interactivity, with forums filling the top rating positions and the largest of them, deacon Andrei Kuraev's forum, counting several tens of thousands of participants. The number of narrowly-specialized pages, including such niche sites as a webpage for those interested in old Russian song manuscripts or a webpage about Orthodoxy and entrepreneurship, rose as well. A deepening of interest in religious life on the part of the general online media resulted in the creation of Religion sections on such portals as ntv.ru and strana.ru. The following years saw these trends strengthening and the number of religious sites growing in parallel with the growth of Runet at large. In March 2001, Sergei Chapnin described the existing state of affairs in the Orthodox Runet in the following way:

It would be no exaggeration to say that in the last two years the internet has become the main consolidating factor in the socio-political life [of Russia]. Runet's Orthodox segment has created an outline of an integrated information space. News, calendars, analytics and interactive discussions are successful in giving a general account of the current standing of the Russian Orthodoxy at the turn of the third millennium (Chapnin 2001).

The first interactive press conference in the religious field entitled 'Church, State and Society in Present-Day Russia' occurred on 23 August 2001, and involved His Eminence Kirill, the then Metropolitan of Smolensk and Kaliningrad, currently the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, answering questions coming not only from the journalists present at the Church Councils Hall of the Christ the Saviour Cathedral but also from internet users. On February 2002, the webpage of the Communications Service of the Department of External Church Relations celebrated its fifth birthday. In 2003, Runet's Orthodox segment counted more than 1,500 sites. A unique broadcast of the church services celebrated on 29 July – 1 August 2003 in Sarov and Diveevo as part of the 100th anniversary of the canonization of St Seraphim of Sarov allowed the venerators of the saint to follow the course of events that took place in a forbidden town and a small village in real time. On 1 September 2003, the Education Committee introduced bogoslov.ru, a distance learning system for the students of ecclesiastical schools of the Russian Orthodox Church, which provided real-time broadcasts of lectures to virtually any point on the country's map. Iskomoe.ru, the very first full-text search engine of the Orthodox Runet, was opened on 10 February 2004. Autumn 2004 saw the publication of the first edition of the Orthodox internet reference book, which included reviews of the Orthodox Runet resources, interviews with the hierarchs and creators of Orthodox sites on the specifics of Orthodox use of the internet, and a catalogue of the most popular sites of the Russian Orthodox Church as of 2004 (Luchenko 2004).

The official site of the press office of the Moscow Patriarchy (patriarch.ru) opened in 2005. That led to the creation of a system in which three sites belonging to the Synodal structures of the Russian Orthodox Church became the sources of official communication of the Patriarchy and the Synod. The Russian Orthodox Church site of the Department of External

Church Affairs, the *sedmitza.ru* site of the Orthodox Encyclopaedia Church Research Centre and the new *patriarchia.ru* site have effectively become the tools for prompt communication for the Russian Orthodox Church that reflect the positions of three influential intra-Church circles: the Department of External Church Relations headed by the Metropolitan Kirill (Gundiaev) of Smolensk and Kaliningrad, the Chancellery of the Moscow Patriarchate headed by the Metropolitan Kliment (Kapalin) of Kaluga and Borovsk, and the Orthodox Encyclopaedia Church Research Centre headed by Sergei Kravets (Luchenko 2007).

After the election of Metropolitan Kirill to the patriarchal see and sweeping administrative reforms in the Russian Orthodox Church, only one official information resource remained: the Patriarchy site *patriarchia.ru*. Each Synodal department and ecclesiastical office now has its own webpage, and so does every diocese, but those sites pertain strictly to the domain of those organizations without claiming Church-wide status.

Current state of affairs in the Orthodox Runet segment

As of today, the catalogue of Russian-language Orthodox online resources lists more than 10,000 sites. The vast majority of them are small-scale private homepages, online representations of parishes and monasteries, or thematic libraries. Orthodox Runet boasts its own Wikipedia-like portal, the Rudrevo reference data site, and its own search engine *iskomoe.ru*, which works as a Google search add-on.

Several of the most popular and sought-after sites, including the whole spectrum of reference data resources, libraries and media sites, date back to more than 10 years ago. Their traffic statistics reached their peak in 2013 and have oscillated between 80,000 and 90,000 unique visitors daily ever since, increasing several times around the major Church feasts. Traditional traffic peaks occur at Easter, Christmas and the beginning of Lent. At Christmas 2014, *Pravoslavie i mir / Orthodox Christianity and the World* portal (*pravmir.ru*) was visited by 420,000 unique users, which propelled the portal to first place in the ratings.

As for today's top four Orthodox sites, according to the main Runet rating site Rambler Top100, there are four leaders in the Religion segment: the Sretensky Monastery site *pravoslavie.ru*, the reference data portal *azbuka.ru*, the 'Orthodox Christianity and the World' portal, and the official portal of the Russian Orthodox Church. Out of those four projects three are private, two have private individuals as their founders and managers, and one belongs to a monastery. Only one official Church made it to the top.

Other leading websites contributing to the general image of the Orthodox Runet include the Orthodox charity portal *miloserdie.ru* – which belongs to the Synodal Department for Church Charity and Social Ministry – the *predanie.ru* archive of video/audio content and e-books, two Orthodox-political sites of the far right, 'Russkaia Liniia' [Russian Line] (*rusk.ru*) and 'Russkaia Narodnaia Liniia' [Russian People's Line] (*ruskline.ru*) and the intellectual portal *bogoslov.ru* maintained by the Moscow Theological Academy. The information field covered by the media which produces and spreads the Orthodox news-based content consists of several sectors:

- The Patriarchal ministry
- Activities of the Synod and Synodal departments
- Life of the Church throughout the country
- Church-State relations
- Interaction between the Church and society (social sphere)
- Life of the Local Churches (Orthodoxy abroad)
- Relations between the Orthodoxy and other faiths
- Feasts of the yearly cycle and memorable dates of Church history

These eight key topics are present in each and every Orthodox online medium. News involving the Patriarch is covered by the official Church sites and secular information portals on a regular basis. The activities of the Patriarchy and the Synodal departments are also widely represented online, as each department has its own site. Regional Church news is published on the diocesan webpages. Besides this, since quite a few diocesan press offices have mailing lists, their major mailed-out news is then republished by the central official Church portals. However, the news feeds of most of the dioceses consist of the local bishop's activity chronicle.

Developments in Church-State relations are the preferred domain for all news producers. Usually such topics unfold over several days or even months, which makes up whole threads of news and 'stories in process'. In recent years, the agenda of Church-State relations has consistently included the following topics: the introduction of Orthodox Culture basics into the school curriculum, institution of army chaplains, development of the educational standard for theology studies, the role of the Church in solving demographic problems, and electronic personal data records. Such acutely sensitive topics as the Law on Protection of Religious Feelings and its implementation, or comments by Patriarch Kirill and other official speakers of the Russian Orthodox Church on pressing political matters, e.g., Russia-Ukraine relations, internal affairs or Russian foreign policy, find their way into the news sections of the Orthodox online media but only when coming from official sources.

News related to the activity of the Church in the social sphere covers topics like charity and benevolence, along with the position of the Church on such major social issues as the ethical regulation of mass media, inter-ethnic relations and bioethical matters.

As far as the Local Orthodox Churches are concerned, news items of this kind are mostly present on the pravoslavie.ru portal that has a special section for such content, and on the sedmitza.ru portal that offers plenty of articles translated from other languages. Besides that, pravoslavie.ru contains extensive reference data on the current situation in the Local Churches.

Information on the celebration of religious feasts and memorable dates published by religious institutions' sites turns out to be the very kind of content that such major Runet news collectors as Yandex and mail.ru long for, which in turn leads to a traffic increase for these sites.

In general, priority areas for the religious online media include various aspects of culture (profiles of historical figures, book and film reviews, educational and analytical pieces on art or different cultural phenomena and trends), family life and morality, charity and community

activities. Current political and social affairs appeal only to independent online media such as pravmir.ru and ruskline.ru.

Besides such traditional printed and online media genres as interviews, journalistic stories, think-pieces, reviews, etc., here one can find specifically religious genres including sermons and hagiography. Internet publications' monitoring and digests are among other popular genres that are typical of the online media.

It is worth noting that even though all the portals publish some videos from time to time, the Orthodox online media remain predominantly textual, with the demand for other content types being significantly lower. Usually these video materials are in fact either interviews or footage of an event, e.g. a roundtable discussion or a press conference. Audio content is less popular than video, although the Orthodox Christianity and the World portal publishes recordings of sermons regularly. Another specific feature of the Orthodox Runet is that the published articles are often longer than is normal for online periodicals. One can even come across texts with as many as 20,000–30,000 characters, which is unrepresentative of the online format in general.

To conclude, the most developed and popular webpages of the religious Runet are the information media sites. And as such, this has been the trend for the last 15 years, since the very early days of the Russian-language Orthodox internet resources. Today's Orthodox online media are first and foremost textual, with a sophisticated rubrication system, daily updates and a state-of-the-art level of technical execution. Topics are mostly limited by the agenda imposed by the official Church structures, as well as by the culturological and social problems of the day. The majority of users favour the four or five most popular and cited religious portals on Runet.

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