

THE RELIGION ON THE SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract: Nowadays, social media dominates the practice of communication, sending words, images, and videos at the speed of light (Seitel, 2011). Users of social networks have the opportunity to write, speak, publish, meet other users, and provide a virtual place for meeting, socializing, and interacting. Social media gives users the flexibility to configure their user settings, customize their profiles to look specific, organize their friends or followers, manage what information they want to see or don't want to see, even give feedback information about what they do, etc. Globalization has made it possible to perceive the world as a whole, to strengthen the sense of belonging, and not to be excluded from the events that take place somewhere on the other side of the world. This paper aims to analyze the relationship between religion and social media, and the subject of research is addressed through the promotion of religion on social media and specifically refers to the situation in the Republic of North Macedonia. The main research question is: How is religion presented on social media? The analysis focuses on the official religious institutions in Macedonia, and through which channels they promote their interests? The primary data source is used using content analysis.

Keywords: social media, web sides, communication, religion.

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Introduction

Social media is an immense phenomenon that impacts many aspects of human life. Virtual communication seems to have become an integral part of the daily lives of many users. As Chang & Heo mentioned no anymore any barriers between the offline and online world (Chang & Heo, 2014).

The Internet as a communication phenomenon is considered as a social phenomenon, as well. Recently, as a new phase has begun, dominated by research on the acceptance of new media and the analysis of their consequences for society in general, the theory of “networked individualism” has taken center stage (Castells 2001, Welman 2001, 2004). Thus, the whole world is connected. Today, social media dominate the practice of communication, sending words, images, and videos at the speed of light (Seitel, 2011 p. 45). Users of social networks have the opportunity to write, speak, publish, meet other users, provide a virtual place for meeting, socializing and interacting. Social media gives users the flexibility to configure their user settings, customize their profiles to look specific, organize their friends or followers, manage what information they want to see or don’t want to see, even give feedback information about what they do, etc. All this points to the enormous power of social media, which is very effective in spreading information and overcoming geographical distances. Social media connects many people at one time, information is visible with the option for prompt answer (social feedback), giving the option to go back to the content many times, accompanied with permanent communication (Fox & Moreland, 2015).

Globalization has made it possible to perceive the world as a whole, to strengthen the sense of belonging and, at the same time, not to be excluded from the events that take place somewhere on the other side of the world.

Social media is our everyday life, so people are using it more and more often to find new ways to interact with religion, so with the help of advanced technology, even religious practices are being transformed. McLuhan argued that “the media is an extension of human being – human bodies, social bodies, and the various conceptions of what human being is” (McLuhan, 1964 p. 21, 70, in Morgan, 2013).

Religion is system of ideas to which believers assented (Hoover, 2006: Lynch, 2012). Further is consider as a embodied practices that cultivate relation among people, places and nonhuman forces (David, 2013) Considering the basic characteristics of the contemporary social media, as well as their advantages in the process of communication, transferring message, creating, and strength believes religion is not immune in using all new form of social media. The main focus of this paper is how and whether religion used available social channels as a tool for communication with their followers. The analysis focuses on the official religious institutions in Macedonia, and through which channels they promote their interests focusing analysis on the web pages, as one of the forms of communication.

1. Conceptual and methodological approach

In this part is a shortly present starting point for the analysis itself. Priveds short overview of the relation between religion and social media as well as method for data collection and analysis itself.

1.1. Conceptual approach Importance of internet and websites for religion

At the latest sixties of the twenty century (1969) the internet revealed a new period for social as well other forms of development of the world. Accompany with the World Wide Web platform develop in 1989 by Sit Term Bernes Lee for the specific target group that academia, research with unexpected speed internet globally start to connect individual, social group and institution all over the “world through the world-wide interconnected network of computer networks (Platform, 2020 p.

2-3). As it is, the internet made dramatic changes, such as easier access and availability of information within computer networks globally. Web site, e-mail, internet chatting, discussion groups, file sharing, telnet are considered as a basic component of the internet.

Analyzing the radicalism and impact of social media United Nation Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) below mentions advantages of using social media. Those are networking across geopolitical borders, bypassing time and space constraints, conducive to producing, disseminating, and consuming propaganda. It hates speech in popular, easy-to-digest forms such as memes, imagery, video, and well-crafted text that can appeal to the target audience.

Religious institutions as other institutions, social groups, individuals recognize the advantage of new social media and use them in a way to be in permanent virtual communication with their believers, and use the internet to send their message to a broader audience. Following the relevant literature at the end of the XX century more than 1.7 million online resources contain information on religion As Hojsgard and Warburg analysis showing in 2004 number of religious web pages increasing permanently, and reach 51 million pages on religion, sixty-five million pages is focus on church, and around eighty-three million web pages contain the word God (Hojsgard and Warburg, 2005). That information indicates that religion has a new virtual space on the internet, beside the physical one (churches, mosques, synagogues etc). This space become so popular during the Covid-19 pandemic time, and continues the same trend (Brien, 2020). Online service was the only one source for communication between religion and believers. Data show evidence that social media play a role in accelerating some crime activities under the religious umbrella, such as radicalizing sympathizers, organizing violence for ideological purpose etc. and found out that Internet is now America's primary gateway to radicalization (Letzing & Berkley, 2021).

Going back to history the evangelize was the one that utilized the new public space using online tools. It happened in the early 1980s, and well known at that time "e-evangelism". During the 1990s, World Wide Web allowed Christian web sides and list servers. New religion expansion occurs by the early 2000, due to the opportunity that social media offers. MySpace claimed over 100,000 religiously themed pages, and for those that were not accepted by the MySpace Xianz.com serve as an alternative platform. At that time the most dominant services that were offered were prayer groups and discussion groups. Recently, the religious organization, group are present on Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, YouTube (Platform, 2020).

As Kevin Robbins points out, the computer as a modern tool in the communication process is a mediator for new forms of communication (Robins, 1996, in Drakulovska, 2020, p. 45). Internet communication, forms of digital communication and connection are considered here, and it allows for easier promotion of religion, greater opportunities for communication of religion with target groups through the form of virtual communication'. This type implies the creation of a new form of connection, available at any time based on common needs, interests and values, and which is realized through the so-called online membership (Rheingold, 1993 in Drakulovska, 2020, p. 45).

As per the analysis done by pew research group "... digital technology clearly has a foothold" As it is noted, using the app or website for searching information about religion is slightly more than one half of respondents that were categorized as a highly religious, and around two fifth of the category of population that is identified as a non-religious use news social media option for the religious purpose (Pew Research Centre, 2023 p.43).

Considering the fact that the new social media aim to connect the one who transmits the information with their users, the analysis in this paper will refer to the forms through which the religious communities, religious groups and other forms are represented and use the new forms of social media. media. Leading by the simple intention to review the situation in Macedonia some research activities were conduction, where the methodology use and the results are presented below.

1.2. Methodological approach

Following above mentioned fact, the main purpose of the research activities is to analyse the relation between social media and religion, where the study problem is elaborate analysing the promotion of religion into the social media in Macedonia. More specifically, how do official religious officials use new social media and through which channels do they promote their interests? How are the subroutines that the analysis refers to: what elements do the official web page consist of? Which communication methods are promoted and presented on our website?

The research uses content analysis as a data collection tool. The unit of analysis is the official websites, the contents and the available ways/forms of communication. In this way, this content analysis has a quantitative character using descriptive statistics (number and percentage)

The main goal of the research is to determine if it exists and to what extent it is represented on the web pages of registered religious churches, groups and on the basis of the results to identify to what extent web marketing is used as one of the aspects for attracting new followers.

For this purpose, data from the official records of "Commission for relations with religious communities and groups in the Republic of North Macedonia" were used. According to the records of mentioned institutions, there are 10 registered religious communities, 12 registered religious groups and 20 registered churches. The sample for the analysis include all-web pages following the of the official register list.

The content analysis is considered as a tool for studying different forms for social communication. In order to determine what content is present on the web pages of religious institutions in Macedonia, it has been designed as an instrument for data collection. Content categories are classified into the following: Web page, Content of the web page: Home page, Blog page, information about the page, Contact page, page link for items and services, available context: religious, social, political intentional activities, other. For content analysis, two ratings were used to determine the existence of a category on the hotel's website: 0="category not present" and 1="category present".

Results

This part presents the results of the research, following the method of data collection and its dimensions: websites (existence & type), content of the websites, other dimensions of social communication, and available context of the websites.

Websites (existence & type)

The analysis starts by searching whether the registered churches, communities and groups related institutions have websites.

Table 1: Web side by the type of religious communities, in number (n)r and percentage (%)

Type of religious communities*	Yes n (%)	No n (%)	N (%)
Registry of churches	5	15	20 (100.0)
Religious communities	4 (1 link not reachable)	6	10 (100.0)
Religious group	2 (1 link not reachable)	10	12 (100.0)
Total	11 (26.2)	31 (73.8)	42 (100.0)

Source: Searching on google by the author. * <https://www.kovz.gov.mk/home/registry-of-religious-communities.nsp>

Data shows that out of 42 the 11 (or 26.2 percent) of registered religious communities have an internet or web side. Out of those 11, 3 links are out of order (see: Table 1). Consequently, the analysis of the contents of websites will take into consideration 8 websites. As per the search almost half of those that do not have a web page link or active one appears in searching as they have its Facebook, or promote themselves on TV, or video.

Based on the data all websites belong to the dynamic category, except 1 that could be classified as semi-dynamic. This is documented with the fact that it offers the option of communication with the visitor as a separate visible one. The Website has a communication framework in a separate section where visitors could send a message. Very few has option Frequently asking questions. The ones that show the posted topic are religious one. The pages are mainly in the Macedonian language, except for 2 that are in English, and 1 of them is in the Bulgarian language.

The content of the website

Home page is an informative character of the webpage. Expectations are to provide a vibrant, acceptable and page that will attract the interest of the individual. Information needed are those one that refer to what the organization is like, what it offers, what it does.

On the home page of the religious institutions that are analyzed, in addition to the name, most of them show photos, indicating what is their belief. The contents are easy approachable, except 1 that could be classified as one with a shortage of information.

Blog page, regularly, consists of some texts and contents, and an option for easy searching part of the page covers some texts, and it is an addition to the home page that offers the option to search for users, type keywords. If the page offers that type of information, provide faster communication, and increase opportunity for new followers.

News, calendar, gallery, published books, contact, religious contact and fast link to all those are available for all page pages that were analyzed. Few of them provide information about mobile applications, and bar code. Majority provide only one contact, and address, and some of them provide contact for the management board of religious institutions, and contact of the same institution outside of the country. Only 1 webpage does not show above mentioned characteristics.

The About page provides information about the activity, what they do etc. The aim is to show which activities have been implemented, certain testimonials, impressions from others, etc. It gives a more detailed view and, in some way, assures us about the specific activity.

According to the analysis 2 webpages did not provide that type of information, or have not updated. Mainly, available information include religious content, some of the show some testimonial of social activities conducted in community, Available information include, text, photos and video with links.

Contact page include different forms: with basic contact information, and there may also be an appointment calendar, a questionnaire form for sending questions, as well the option of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

According to the data, only one webpage provides only basic information. Contact information is well represented on the all analysed websites. Few of them offered contacts of the other places within the country where they have church, contact person, address and electronic email, and maps with direction *Site map*.

Servis and donate page is a dedicated page through which visitors will be attracted. Out of all, one website does not have that page, one provides only in English language, and the rest that have it include shops, donations, e-link to holy books.

"Social media" dimension information about availability of other social networks. As it is evident, the most represented category is "Facebook" (4), and "Youttube" (5), "Google+" (1). No category "Twit-

ter", "Snapchat", "Instagram", "WhatsApp", "Linkedin" or something else. This part analyses use of the other social media as a way of communication, but only if websites provide the link.

Available content on the website indicates that all web pages provide religious content in the form of (parts of holy books, information of a religious nature for the community, current events, etc.). Three webpages cover social topics that include some analysis and advice related to women, children, family, health, healthy food, and one offers a course for English language. Topics that cover some topics related to politics were not shown, but politics is present in the part of international content that 2 web pages provide. They providing link for news at the international level, for USA

The answer of the research question led to the conclusion that social media are used by the religious intuitions on the lower level, and that web pages as a stable source of communication, and as a channel for promotion their interest is available at the lower level.

The religious institutions that are having websites understand the importance of websites as a channel, considering the fact that mostly all relevant elements for communication are available, and information is regularly updated. Provide a dynamic approach with the visitors. Their features are easy access to information, ease of use and reliability. Interactive approach and compatible with other links that provide their resources (the most Facebook and YouTube) enable users to find what they are looking for.

Research questions related to which communication methods are promoted and presented on our website, leading to the answer that the best communication method that is promoted in the website is video and hyperlink to the holy books and religious relevant sources.

Conclusion

Websites as a starting point of communication on the Internet must meet the expectations of the target's group/ visitors' tors in order to immediately attract their attention and encourage them to search further. The existence of quality content, that is, current and reliable information, are prerequisites for successful communications into the global world.

Overall, the present analysis demonstrates that webpage as a way of presenting the religious institution in Macedonia is not at the level of satisfaction. Majority of the religions community that use webpages meet the requirement for the web page, but still there is a room for improvement. Having in mind the importance of social media, there is a need for their availability and usage.

For the sake of objectivity, it is necessary to state the limitations of the conducted research and suggestions for future research in terms of the method used, In the paper, the method of content analysis was applied, and it was determined whether the web pages specified content exists or not. Further, there is a possibility that not all contents are included or that it is possible to group them in a different way. Also, in future research it is possible to evaluate the quality of web pages, not just the representation of content on web pages, which would enable the implementation of an analysis of importance and performance analysis). A significant contribution to research would be realized if those pages evaluated themselves. The obtained results should then be compared with the results obtained in comparison with competitive one's social media. The mentioned limitations are the starting point for future research.

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