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DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION OF UKRAINIAN CHURCHES: CASE STUDIES OF THE UKRAINIAN GREEK CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE ORTHODOX CHURCH OF UKRAINE

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Abstract: *The paper explores the phenomenon of the digital presence of Ukrainian churches between 2014 and 2025, focusing on two major denominations – the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU). Following the Revolution of Dignity, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and amid the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war, religious organizations in Ukraine have actively entered the online space, utilizing social media, streaming platforms, mobile applications, and other digital tools to communicate with believers. This digital transition has profoundly reshaped how religious services are delivered and has become a crucial means of maintaining spiritual support during times of crisis. The study is based on the analysis of official church documents, digital platforms, and media resources of the UGCC and OCU, as well as on scholarly literature concerning digital religion and media communication. Additionally, the paper also analyzes the legal aspects of this digital presence, including the regulation of religious content on the Internet, compliance with data protection legislation, copyright issues, and the protection of freedom of conscience in the digital environment. The research also addresses the problem of fake religious resources and disinformation, which have become serious concerns in contemporary Ukrainian society.*

Keywords: *Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, digital presence, online religion, online-Church.*

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Introduction

The 21st century is defined by profound digital transformation, characterized by the explosive growth of communication technologies, unprecedented speed of information flow, and the integration of digital tools into nearly all spheres of human existence. This digital revolution necessitates that institutions across society redefine their operational modes, and the Christian Church is no exception, being compelled to reconsider the methods and forms of its missionary activities in the contemporary world. New media environments, including social networks, video platforms, and internet television, have emerged as converged platforms crucial for disseminating religious thought and engaging in missionary work. The rapid adoption of these tools presents a fundamental challenge to traditional religious bodies, forcing them to adapt to new informational demands while maintaining doctrinal integrity and spiritual authenticity.

For Ukrainian Christianity, the period between 2014 and 2025 represents a critical era defined by escalating existential challenges which radically accelerated this digital transition. Three major factors – the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian War in 2014/Revolution of Dignity, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic starting in 2020, and the subsequent full-scale Russian invasion in 2022—have acted as potent catalysts for the deep integration of digital technologies into religious life.

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic brought the virtual realm into sharp focus. Quarantine restrictions posed a severe challenge to the fundamental communal nature of the Church (the *Ecclesia*, or «assembly of the faithful»), leading to intense theological and practical debates regarding the possibility and limits of remote religious practice, notably the highly contentious «online Eucharist». The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) rapidly scaled up online broadcasts of services transforming them into vital necessities for consolidating and maintaining the faithful's participation.

The onset of the full-scale invasion in February 2022 further cemented the role of the digital sphere, rendering digital communication the sole means of maintaining coherence for communities dispersed across Ukraine and worldwide due to mass migration and forced displacement.

While the advantages of digitalization are clear, this rapid transition is fraught with complex intellectual, ethical, and legal challenges. Scholars note that digitalization heightens negative sociological phenomena such as polarization, marginalization, manipulation, and the propagation of disinformation, particularly within the religious segment of society. The digital space, particularly amid war, demands that the Church critically assess its role, preserving its salvific message while actively countering harmful ideologies like the “Russian World” concept.

Against this backdrop of unprecedented crisis and accelerating technological integration, this paper explores the phenomenon of the digital presence of Ukrainian churches during the period from 2014 to 2025, with particular attention to the UGCC, the OCU, and Protestant communities.

Methodology and sources

The research applies a descriptive and comparative methodology combined with content analysis of official online resources, church documents, and digital media of the UGCC and OCU. It also draws on key academic works in the field of digital religion and media communication, which form the theoretical framework of this study. Heidi Campbell (2013) introduced the concept of digital religion as a hybrid space where online and offline religious practices intersect, redefining traditional notions of sacred presence and community. Stig Hjarvard (2016) developed the theory of the mediatization of religion, emphasizing that the media are not neutral transmitters but active agents shaping religious experience and authority structures. Stewart Hoover (2006) explored how media environments transform public expressions of faith, particularly in societies undergoing social

and political change. Building upon these frameworks, the present research situates the Ukrainian case within the broader global discourse on the interaction between religion and digital technology. This multi-level approach makes it possible to trace how global trends in the mediatization of religion manifest in the Ukrainian context – one deeply affected by war, political transformation, and rapid technological development. By combining theoretical perspectives with empirical data, the study contributes to understanding how religious institutions adapt their communication, identity, and mission to the realities of digital modernity

The empirical material includes official church websites, online media platforms (“Zhyve TV”, “DyvenSvit”, “Pomisna.info”), social media accounts of leading clerics, and relevant legal documents issued by the UGCC and OCU between 2014 and 2025. The analysis focuses on identifying strategies, forms, and challenges of digital adaptation in pastoral, missionary, and communicative practices.

1. Digitalization of Religious Communication in Ukraine (2014–2025)

For Ukrainian Christianity, the period spanning 2014 to 2025 constitutes a pivotal era of accelerated adaptation, driven primarily by escalating national crises. The digitalization of religious life and communication in Ukraine has been profoundly influenced by three major, interconnected factors: the Revolution of Dignity and the onset of the Russian-Ukrainian War in 2014, the COVID-19 pandemic starting in 2020, and the full-scale Russian military invasion in 2022. These events collectively posed an existential challenge to Ukrainian Christian churches. The urgency of the digital shift was demonstrated by the realization that what was once merely a «complement» to religious reality during peacetime now functions as the main channel for transmitting religious teachings and ideas in times of crisis.

1) The Russian aggression starting in 2014, particularly the full-scale invasion in February 2022, severely compounded the need for digital presence. Due to mass migration and forced displacement, online communication became the sole method for maintaining cohesion within communities scattered across Ukraine and globally. Digital platforms provided crucial tools for coordinating social services, delivering humanitarian aid, and offering spiritual guidance amid active hostilities. This situation highlights that, for survival, «online» and «digital» ceased to be mere luxuries and became guarantees of existence. The confrontation in the information space emerged as a crucial second front in the war, making online presence a resource for liberation and countering informational manipulation.

2) The pandemic was a significant catalyst that forced religious organizations to enter the online space actively. The rapid embrace of digital tools led to significant changes in how faith is shared and practiced. For example: digital technologies expanded the scope of Christian communication, increasing audience size and speeding up the exchange of religious information. The core digital tools employed include social networks (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter), video platforms (YouTube), blogs, and public internet television. The phenomenon of virtualization led to the appearance of various new forms of religiosity in the virtual space, such as virtual pilgrimage tours, online confessionals, internet churches, and even internet religions.

3) The full-scale Russian military invasion, which commenced on February 24, 2022, represents the third, and arguably the most traumatic, catalyst for the total integration of Ukrainian religious life into the digital sphere. This aggression was viewed as an event “more satanic” than historical calamities, such as those witnessed in Bucha, Irpin, and Mariupol. The immediate threat of real physical genocide and total destruction led to the abrupt de-actualization of previous societal debates (including those surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic) and spurred rapid social consolidation. The war transformed the internet from a missionary tool into an existential necessity and a resource for

survival. The massive scale of displacement – with over 11 million Ukrainians forced to leave their homes, including approximately 4 million seeking refuge abroad – shattered traditional communities. In this context of forced migration, social downshifting, and the brutal severing of religious ties, online communication became the sole method for maintaining living communication and cohesion among scattered communities. The technological readiness achieved during the COVID-19 pandemic ensured that many communities did not experience a radical shock when shifting operations fully online.

In summary, the period from 2014 to 2025 witnessed Ukrainian religious communication transitioning from gradual media integration to a full-fledged, crisis-driven reliance on digital tools. While digitalization enabled the continuation of spiritual life and expanded missionary impact during periods of war and pandemic, it simultaneously exposed Ukrainian churches to profound new threats.

2. Case Studies of Ukrainian Churches

2.1. Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church

The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) stands out among Ukrainian Christian denominations for its comprehensive and proactive engagement with the digital sphere, a development deeply rooted in the broader Catholic tradition of media awareness. The UGCC's communication strategy has been significantly accelerated by existential crises in Ukraine since 2014, solidifying its role as an institution enjoying high public trust (Волик, 2025 p. 140).

The UGCC's approach to digital communication is framed by the Roman Catholic Church's long-standing reflection on media, beginning with the Second Vatican Council's Decree on Social Communication, *Inter Mirifica* (1963). This foundational document officially introduced the term «social communication» to denote not merely technical devices but the very method of societal interaction. Subsequent papal messages and encyclicals consistently addressed emerging technologies, viewing them as ambiguous tools – capable of promoting good but also posing threats like the loss of information authenticity. Nevertheless, Popes encouraged the active, creative use of new media for evangelization, catechesis, and spreading the Gospel (*Українське християнство в цифровому світі...*, p. 186).

The UGCC's formal digital strategy began to materialize when internet access became widespread in Ukraine around the early 2000s. The UGCC launched its official website in 2004. Recognizing the need for adaptation, the Synod of Bishops discussed the proper presentation of the UGCC online in 2010. By 2013, the Church decided to expand its resources into a comprehensive portal, including the Official UGCC website, Media Resource UGCC, Information Resource UGCC, and, since 2019, a dedicated website for Official UGCC Documents (*Українське християнство в цифровому світі...*, p. 170; *Компендіум Католицької Церкви*, p. 8, *Документи Другого Ватиканського Собору*, p. 5.).

Formal steps toward a cohesive communication strategy intensified around 2019, culminating in the creation of the Patriarchal Council for Social Communications of the UGCC in May 2019, tasked with developing strategic communication goals and crisis response plans. This process also involved formal training in media literacy for press secretaries (*Українське християнство в цифровому світі...*, p. 64-65).

A groundbreaking step among Ukrainian traditional Christian Churches was the introduction of the Instruction on the Presence of Church Structures, Institutions, Clergy, and Consecrated Persons in the Internet Network in August 2020. This instruction acknowledged the virtual space as a vital

communication platform while establishing clear ethical boundaries. Crucially, it stipulated that the online activity of clergy, even on personal accounts, must be directed toward spreading the Gospel and the spiritual welfare of the faithful, asserting that such accounts are «never separated from pastoral and monastic ministry» (Положення про патріаршу раду соціальних комунікацій, 2019; Інструкція про присутність церковних структур, інституцій, духовенства, богосвячених осіб КГВА УГКЦ у мережі «Інтернет», 2020; Congregation for the Clergy, 2020).

The UGCC has actively implemented its strategy through various platforms, encompassing evangelization, education, and spiritual support. Traditional print periodicals, such as the magazine *Misionar* (founded 1897), transitioned to electronic versions starting in 2012, running parallel to the printed format. Digital media resources include «Zhyve TV» (Live TV), «Vervytsia yednaie» (Rosary Unites), and the youth platform «DyvenSvit» (WonderWorld), which boasts over 49,500 followers on Facebook and focuses on re-framing the internet as a space where God and His followers are present (Волик, 2025 p. 143).

The UGCC demonstrated its focus on reaching all segments of the community by developing dedicated mobile applications. Examples include mobile games for children (ages 3–10) based on biblical stories, such as «Creation of the World» and «Christmas of Christ» (developed since 2018).

The emergence of clergy as «spiritual bloggers» has been positively received by society. Active priests use platforms like Instagram and YouTube to popularize Christian values and engage in dialogue, particularly with youth. Notable examples include Father Roman Demush (Facebook та Instagram-сторінки Fr. Romana Demusha), known for evangelization and involvement in the media project #Za_posty. The presence of figures like Fr. Andriy Zelinskyi (Facebook. Fr. Andriia Zelinskii), a military chaplain and strategic communications advisor, further highlights the use of digital channels to address crucial contemporary issues like military chaplaincy and spiritual support for servicemen.

The UGCC's robust digital structure proved essential during the crises of 2020–2022. The UGCC was among the leaders in supporting government measures during the pandemic. Notably, the Church organized vaccination points in its parishes, which was seen as a clear official endorsement of vaccination. This posture contrasted sharply with certain conservative factions in other denominations who expressed anti-vaccination or COVID-dissident views.

The UGCC played a significant role in consolidating society and providing moral guidance during the full-scale Russian invasion. The services of the Head of the UGCC were broadcast on the national telethon #UARazom (#UAtogether) on Easter 2022. The UGCC leadership actively participated in interconfessional prayers at St. Sophia of Kyiv, often reading prayers from smartphones or tablets, demonstrating a natural integration of technology into sacred space, even amid the dangers of war.

Belonging to the larger international Catholic community provided UGCC adherents with advantages during mass migration, offering greater ease of adaptation across borders, despite linguistic and ritual differences (Ukrainian language, Byzantine rite). The Church's online presence ensured continuity of communication and spiritual life for those displaced.

In conclusion, the UGCC's experience from 2014 to 2025 demonstrates a flexible and proactive approach to digital transformation. Through the effective use of technology, the Church has sustained its spiritual mission in times of crisis while simultaneously extending its reach and influence, ensuring that its teachings of faith, hope, and love remain accessible and relevant in the digital era.

2.2. *Orthodox Church of Ukraine*

The establishment of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) in 2019, following the receipt of the Tomos of Autocephaly, marked a new phase in its internal and external communication strategies. The subsequent challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian full-scale invasion in 2022 further accelerated the OCU's engagement with digital platforms, distinguishing its approach

from the more conservative communication of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) (UOC-MP).

The communication activities of the OCU within the network space entered a new phase following the reception of the Tomos of autocephaly from Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew in January 2019. This pivotal event fundamentally changed the direction of both the internal, inter-church communication within Ukraine and the external communication at the level of universal Orthodoxy (Соколов Б., 2025). The struggle for a local Orthodox Church was accompanied by powerful information flows, and the process of the OCU's establishment became a significant discourse within the Ukrainian-Russian information war. Notably, the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the faithful of the UOC-MP did not recognize the Tomos, viewing the OCU as non-canonical due to issues concerning the ordinations of its bishops (Горкуша О., Филипович Л., 2014).

The establishment of a unified local OCU was actively debated in the media, confirming the pivotal role of media tools in shaping civil society and national self-assertion. The media campaign surrounding the Tomos was highly polarized. Russian online media reacted with "information panic," using terms like "schismatics," "non-canonical," and "Banderites" to discredit the OCU. Reporting from media with explicit pro-Russian positions (such as Strana) contained significant narratives aligning with Russian propaganda (38% of content), while other major Ukrainian news sources maintained neutral coverage (e.g., *Ukrainska Pravda* at 98% neutral). The rhetoric of the UOC-MP clergy often mirrored the tone of official ROC spokespersons, focusing on denying the OCU's legitimacy (УПЦ (МП): немає підстав..., 2018).

Crisis situations – the COVID-19 pandemic and the full-scale Russian invasion – have significantly shaped the OCU's digital practices. During the pandemic, the OCU promptly adhered to all quarantine regulations and quickly established online broadcasts of church services. This period catalyzed deep theological debates, particularly regarding the phenomenon of online Eucharist (online communion), sparked by the case of a Zaporizhzhia priest, Fr. Ihor Savva. This incident initiated a rigorous theological polemic within the OCU concerning the remote celebration of the liturgy (Сава І., 2021; Феномен онлайн-причастя..., 2021).

The full-scale invasion of 2022 made digital communication a vital necessity for the OCU. Online platforms became the main means of preserving community ties, especially for displaced believers. The Church's integration into national initiatives was exemplified by its participation in the #UARazon national telethon, where statements of the OCU Primate and interconfessional prayers from St. Sophia of Kyiv were broadcast. The Easter 2022 service was also transmitted as part of this telethon, ensuring wide national visibility (Молитва в Софії Київській..., 2022).

In the sphere of missionary activity, the OCU launched online projects such as "God against War / Religious Ethos in Practice During War", aimed at informing the global community, countering Russian propaganda, exposing the ideology of the "Russian World," and promoting a theology of peace. Regular broadcasts of services from St. Michael's Golden-Domed Monastery in Kyiv gathered weekly audiences of 8,000–10,000 viewers on YouTube and up to 30,000 on Facebook (Українське християнство в цифровому світі..., p. 153 – 156).

After the granting of the Tomos of autocephaly, the OCU established its official website www.pomisna.info, which functions as a central communication hub, providing church news, coverage of Metropolitan Epifaniy's visits, service videos, and sermons. The Church also expanded into social media, actively using Facebook and Instagram to reach younger audiences with posts including quotes, greetings, and information on charitable aid.

To strengthen its digital presence, in autumn 2021 the OCU launched the mobile application "Moya Tserkva" (My Church). It provides access to news, a religious calendar with push notifications, a prayer book, an interactive map of churches, and tools for direct online communication with priests (Православна Церква України запустила власний мобільний застосунок..., 2021).

Thus, the OCU has systematically built a digital infrastructure that combines religious communication, national information resistance, and global missionary outreach.

3. Legal Aspects and Challenges of Digital Transformation

The rapid digitalization of religious life in Ukraine, exacerbated by the existential crises of the COVID-19 pandemic and the full-scale war, thrust Ukrainian Christian churches into complex legal, ethical, and regulatory territory. This context demanded that institutions navigate issues ranging from the fundamental right to freedom of conscience to intellectual property rights in the digital realm.

The acceleration of digitalization in Ukrainian religious life – driven by COVID-19 lockdowns and the ongoing full-scale war – has forced churches to confront an array of legal, ethical, and regulatory challenges. These span constitutional rights, state security, freedom of religion and belief, intellectual property, data protection, and the regulation of religious organizations especially when connected (or perceived to be connected) with foreign entities.

The most immediate and painful legal challenge arose during the pandemic, as quarantine restrictions profoundly impacted the social component of church life – the assembly of the faithful for ritual activities and community building. The necessity of closing places of worship led to fervent debate, as many conservative and radical orthodox groups viewed restrictions on religious gatherings as an infringement upon basic legal freedoms.

This period crystallized an acute philosophical and political question: where lies the boundary between the state's duty to ensure public security and its right to limit individual freedom? Furthermore, the mandatory nature of mass vaccination activated deep-seated eschatological concerns among some conservative groups – dubbed the “eschatological trigger” – and intensified debates surrounding the problems of informed consent, the balance between freedom and security, and the inviolability of the physical body. Clerics and radical orthodox movements, including the Dohenalites and representatives of the UOC-MP, voiced opposition to biometric ID-passports and so-called “chip-ization,” associating these technological instruments with the “mark of the beast” (666). They feared total control and the erosion of personal freedom. However, scholars argued that believers should apply sober judgment to digitalization tools and should not succumb to pseudochristian provocations, emphasizing that genuine Christian freedom means living in truth, independent of external technological threats (Шубарт П., 2013; Чому ми боїмося числа 666?, 2021).

Digital tools for religious communities (apps, online platforms) also introduce privacy risks: collection of contact data, geolocation, possibly notification systems. Churches have to be compliant with data protection law, ensure secure storage, transparency, allow opt-in/out, etc. Digitalization of religious services (live-streaming liturgies, uploading sermons, apps for prayers and readings) brings with it issues of intellectual property (who owns the recorded service, permissions to re-use, copyrights over liturgical texts and music) and licensing. Churches must ensure that streaming platforms or third parties do not infringe copyright or misuse materials without consent.

Conclusion

The digital transformation of Ukrainian churches between 2014 and 2025 constitutes a unique case where religion, technology, and national crisis converged to produce profound institutional and theological change. The Revolution of Dignity, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war acted as successive catalysts that compelled churches to adopt digital technologies not as auxiliary tools but as essential instruments of survival, communication, and mission. This

transformation redefined the notion of sacred presence, extending it from the physical space of the church to the digital environment and shaping a new hybrid model of religious experience.

The UGCC and the OCU have demonstrated the most dynamic adaptation to digital realities. Through official websites, online broadcasts, mobile applications, and active participation on social media, these Churches successfully integrated technological innovation into their pastoral and missionary activities. Their digital initiatives – ranging from online liturgies and catechetical programs to humanitarian coordination and interfaith online prayers – strengthened spiritual resilience, supported displaced persons and chaplains, and contributed to preserving a sense of national unity and hope amid destruction and uncertainty.

Beyond the practical dimension, the digital turn in Ukrainian Christianity revealed complex legal, ethical, and theological challenges. Questions of copyright, data protection, and online religious freedom became intertwined with broader societal issues such as information security and state–church relations during wartime. The pandemic period exposed deep tensions between public health policies and the freedom of worship, while the rise of disinformation and pseudo-religious narratives required new forms of digital discernment and pastoral responsibility. The Ukrainian experience thus underscores the necessity of developing a legal and ethical framework that balances technological innovation with the protection of conscience, dignity, and truth in the digital public sphere.

In the broader academic context, the Ukrainian case enriches the global discourse on digital religion and the mediatization of faith. It demonstrates how religious institutions in times of crisis can transform digital technologies into instruments of solidarity, identity preservation, and moral resistance. Ukrainian churches have shown that digitalization, when grounded in pastoral care and theological reflection, can deepen rather than diminish the authenticity of faith.

Ultimately, the digital transformation of Ukrainian Christianity is not a temporary adaptation but a long-term structural shift that will continue to shape ecclesial identity, communication, and governance in the 21st century. The coexistence of online and offline dimensions of worship, the increasing importance of digital ethics, and the creative use of media for evangelization indicate that the boundaries of the sacred have expanded into the virtual domain. The Ukrainian experience offers an instructive model for global religious communities seeking to navigate the opportunities and threats of digital modernity – affirming that even in the midst of war and profound instability, faith retains its vitality as a communicative encounter between the human and the divine – one that transcends fear, nurtures communion, and preserves humanity’s capacity to hope.

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