

THE ORTHODOX RELIGIOUS PUBLICATIONS IN ROMANIA FROM THE CLASSICAL PRINTING TO ONLINE EDITIONS

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ABSTRACT. A research on the rise and decline of the Romanian Orthodox religious media in the last 30 years cannot ignore the paradigm shifts caused by the emergence of new information and communication technologies and the global Internet network. The theological and spiritual contents do not instantly adapt to technological innovations and, therefore, the printing press remains a space for reflection in religious communication, between the opportunities and risks of rapid change.

The transition of religious publications from print editions to online editions is necessary. However, by virtue of spiritual discernment, it requires a balance between tradition and renewal. This balance is kept due to three elements: the respect for the heritage of the printed sacred culture, the pastoral care for the older generations and the awareness of the responsibility for the unaltered transmission of the spiritual content of faith to the generation of digital natives.

Keywords: Internet, newspapers, online edition, print edition, religious media

Preliminary observations

A threat of loss of importance or even disappearance of already existing means of communication has been manifested in each stage of improvement of communication forms and effectiveness. Subsequently, in the twentieth century, the radio, the cinema, and the television overshadowed the print media, and at the beginning of the new millennium the digital networks tend to agglutinate in the virtual space texts, sounds and images, in a structure that incorporates previous forms of communication.

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Nevertheless, just as the codex manuscripts and the medieval chronicles survived long after Gutenberg's invention was widely spread, the Internet has not yet made obsolete the print media, the radio, or the television. The digitization of communication has led to media convergence. Each of the traditional, classical means of communication has developed its power of transmission by appropriating the compatible features of the new technologies (electronic editions of printed books and newspapers, digital printing, digital radios and televisions accessible on smart phones and smart devices, virtual libraries, etc.).

Further on, we will focus on the transformations that our religious publications have gone through in the last decade of the previous century and in the first two decades of the 21st century, under the pressure of paradigm shifts in information and communication technologies.

Tradition, rebirth and renewal in the Romanian Orthodox religious media

In the common history of the Romanian media, the publications edited by the Church-affiliated people represent a significant category, both in terms of longevity and consistency, and in terms of number and diversity of content. Titles such as *Telegraful Român*, *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, *Candela*, *Biserica și Școala*, *Revista Teologică*, *Renașterea*, *Foaia Diecezană* are renowned not only in the theological field, but also in connected areas such as literature, history, pedagogy or cultural anthropology. Following the 45 years-long communist dictatorship, there was a real rebirth of religious publications in Romania.

The development of the Orthodox religious media was a double layered one, spanning between tradition and renewal². On the one hand, publications, which had functioned in the interwar period and had suspended their activity at the establishment of the communist regime, were reactivated. On the other hand, new periodicals have been launched, especially in the newly established church centres or in the theological faculties and seminaries. The Orthodox media has continuously developed in the last three decades, with the intensification of the Church's cultural-missionary and social-philanthropic activities in society. The increase in number of theological institutions and the introduction of Religious Education in schools have stimulated the diversification of the religious media.

² Nicolae Dascălu, "Evoluția presei ortodoxe în spațiul de limbă română", in *Mass media din România după 30 de ani* (Bucharest: Tritonic, 2020), 155-162.

The diocesan centres, the parishes and the monasteries, the educational institutions and some cultural associations and organizations have adopted in their activities print media tools: official bulletins, academic journals of theology and interdisciplinary dialogue, and journals addressing different categories of believers.

Thus, new series of old magazines reappeared: *Renașterea* in Cluj-Napoca, *Legea Românească* in Oradea, *Foaia Diecezană* in Caransebeș, *Biserica și Școala și Calea mântuirii* in Arad, *Candela* in Suceava, *Renașterea* in Râmnicu Vâlcea, *Revista teologică* in Sibiu, *Luminătorul* in Chișinău. *Telegraful Român*, the oldest Romanian publication, which had been continuously printed in Sibiu, since 1853.

There are other new publications released after 1990. Some of them are still published nowadays; others have been discontinued after an ephemeral existence. In Iași, the publication *Cuvânt și Suflet* was first published in March 1990 while, in 1992, *Candela Moldovei*, the official bulletin of the Metropolitan Church of Moldova and Bucovina appeared for the first time. *Călăuza ortodoxă* was first published in the form of a newspaper in Galați in March 1990. Later, this became an A4-sized religious magazine with an informative content. Other church centres have printed their own publications: *Învierea*, in Timisoara; *Candela*, in Suceava, *Tomisul ortodox*, in Constanța, *Argeșul ortodox*, in Curtea de Argeș; *Glăsuț al Adevărului*, in Buzău, *Bărăganul ortodox*, in Slobozia, *Cuvânt Bun*, in Tulcea, *Revista Ortodoxă*, in Giurgiu, *Credința strabună*, in Alba Iulia, *Graiul Bisericii Noastre*, in Baia Mare, *Grai românesc*, in Miercurea Ciuc, *Praxis* and *Martyria* in Râmnicu Vâlcea is in print since 2014.

We must also mention here the journals published by the Romanian Orthodox dioceses in the diaspora, which increased the number of their communities every year, a direct consequence of mass migration. *Apostolia*, a monthly magazine of Orthodox spirituality and information, has been published in Paris since April 2008, in an A5 format, containing 64 colour pages, in two languages: Romanian and French. The Romanian Orthodox Metropolitanate of Germany, Central and Northern Europe has published *Deisis*, a magazine of Orthodox spirituality and culture, since 1995. The Orthodox Romanians from Scandinavia have had, since 2008, the diocesan magazine *Candela Nordului*, with pages in Romanian and English. The Romanian Orthodox Metropolitanate of the Americas publishes *Credința*, and in 2008 the diocesan publication *Altarul străbun* appeared in Australia. In the Romanian Orthodox diaspora, there are also numerous parishes that print publications addressed to local Orthodox communities, with bilingual editions.

The image of the Orthodox printed media in this period can be analysed from various perspectives: according to the content of the publications, the editors, the periodicity, the format and the target audience.

According to the content, the Orthodox publications between 1989 and 2019 can be grouped as follows:

- 1) *Official periodical publications of dioceses and publications of religious information;*
- 2) *Academic journals of theological studies and scientific research;*
- 3) *Journals of Orthodox spirituality and culture;*
- 4) *Publications for children and parents;*
- 5) *Parish and monastic publications;*
- 6) *Magazines of schools and Christian associations;*
- 7) *Journals of Christian attitude towards current social issues.*

The first group includes the central publications of the Romanian Patriarchate (*Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, *Vestitorul Ortodoxiei*, the *Ziarul Lumina* daily paper), but also diocesan bulletins (*Învieirea*, *Bărăganul ortodox*, *Foaia Diecezană*, etc.).

Some magazines published by the metropolitan centres (*Glasul Bisericii*, *Teologie și Viață*, *Revista teologică*, *Mitropolia Olteniei*, *Altarul Banatului*) include information about the present state of the church and the theological education, making the transition to the latter category.

The theological and scientific research journals are developed through cooperation with Orthodox theological faculties throughout the country and through collaborations with academic institutions from abroad. In fact, *Studii teologice* is the journal of the faculties of theology in the Romanian Patriarchate, and *Ortodoxia*, throughout its pages promotes the inter-Orthodox and inter-confessional dialogue. *Studia Universitatis Babeș Bolyai* is published in Cluj-Napoca; other university centres in the country publish magazines that support the dialogues between religion, science and philosophy.

The following journals, *TABOR* in Cluj, *Deisis* in Germany and *Apostolia* in Paris, are the most representative publications among the Orthodox spirituality and culture journals.

The most famous publication for parents and children is *Chemarea credinței*, published in 1994 by the Institute for Biblical Studies and the Orthodox Mission of the Romanian Patriarchate. It is printed in 9000 copies and is distributed in schools and kindergartens. There are also several magazines for students in the country, written by teachers and educators, alongside parents and children.

Among the parish and monastic publications, some survive longer and are better integrated amongst the parishioners, others appear and disappear after short periods of time.

The students of theological seminaries and Orthodox high schools still preserve old traditions and edit printed publications, often combined with websites and social media pages. Among the publications of the Christian associations, we mention the *Oastea Domnului* magazine and the *Iisus Biruitorul* newspaper, published by the religious association "Oastea Domnului". *Timotheos*, an illustrated youth magazine, has been published since 1993 as a supplement to the *Iisus Biruitorul* newspaper.

The seventh group may include some initiatives of lay Orthodox intellectuals who want to contribute with their missionary zeal, inspired by militant monks, to a better public knowledge of the teachings of the Church and to propose a spiritual understanding of the problems of today's society. *Familia Ortodoxă*, *Lumea credinței*, *Lumea Monahilor*, *Atitudini*, and *Conștiința* deal with topics such as family, migration, the Christian ethos in a consumerist and secularized society, the education of young people, the role of great clergy and others. Some of the editors motivate their journalistic approaches by the lack of combativeness of the official publications to the pressure that the contemporary society exerts on the mind, the consciousness and the will of the Orthodox believers.

From the perspective of periodicity, the range of publications in our country includes: annual almanac-type publications (published in Târgoviște, Buzău, Slobozia, Sibiu, Curtea de Argeș, Giurgiu), semi-annual, quarterly, bimonthly, monthly publications, including weekly periodicals, and, since 2005, a daily journal (*Ziarul Lumina*), with a weekly supplement (*Lumina de Duminică*).

The audience consists, for most publications, of the clergy and believers of the established authority that publishes the respective journals. The publications issued by the faculties of theology and by the theological seminaries have a limited target audience, made up of the community of teachers and students or pupils of the institution.

At the beginning of 2018, there were 322 Orthodox publications which represented about 10% of the total titles of newspapers and periodicals in Romania³.

Press digitalisation, a global scale phenomenon

The fame of interwar newspapers, with morning, lunch and evening editions in the big cities, gradually diminished with the widespread use of the audio-visual in the consumer society. For a long time, the printed media took its

³ *Catalogul mediatic ortodox – ediția 2017* [The Orthodox Media Catalogue – 2017 edition] (Bucharest: Basilica, 2017); <http://statistici.insse.ro:8077/tempo-online/#/pages/tables/insse-table>, accessed on 1.11.2020.

decent place behind the radio and the television, assuming a hermeneutic function of events, according to the principle: the radio announces, the television shows, and the newspaper explains. At the same time, the periodicals have assumed a connecting role between the book and the new media, mainly through specialized journals and high academic competence. It was a return to the origins and a correction applied to the enthusiasm of the French poet Alfred de Lamartine who, in 1837, proclaimed the supremacy of the newspaper over the book: "the thought will spread all over the world with the speed of light, instantly conceived, instantly written and likewise understood. It will envelop the earth from one pole to the other - suddenly, instantly, burning with the fervour of the soul from which it first sprang. This will be the empire of the human word in all its fullness. The thought will not have time to ripen, to adjust in the form of a book - the book will arrive too late. The only possible book from now on is the newspaper⁴".

After a century and a half, these words seem more appropriate with the Internet than with the newspaper. The colonization of the entire communication space by computers connected in branched networks around the globe and in outer space has produced a paradigm shift in the functioning of traditional means of communication. At the crossroads of millennia, all major print media companies around the world have followed the model of the audio-visual companies and accessed the virtual space. At first, it was done only with the PDF projection of printed pages, later with online editions designed according to the canons of new communication technologies, different from the more classic ones of printed publications.

The number of unique visitors on the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* or *Le Monde* websites has far exceeded the number of readers of print editions. *L'Osservatore Romano*, *La Croix*, *Etudes* or *Christianity Today* and many other religious publications in the West follow the same direction. Studies conducted by the Central and Eastern European press show cohabitation between print and digital and a slower abandonment of traditional publications. In the interaction between the old media and the new technologies, there is a negotiation that causes changes in the operation of the former or, through hybridization, give rise to the latter: "The graphic presentation of the interactions between the media at the first point in time indicates that the media arena is controlled by the more established medium (A) when a new medium appears (B). This is the initial thesis of the dynamic process. At this point, two developments or antitheses may emerge: displacement of the older medium by the new one because of the functional equivalence between them

⁴Nicholas Carr, *Superficialii: Efectele Internetului asupra creierului uman* [The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains], translated by Dan Crăciun, (Bucharest: Publica, 2012), 153.

(in the upper portion of the model, medium A is displaced and disappears) or the creation of conditions suitable for the shared existence of the two media with little functional interchangeability. Nevertheless, the appearance of medium B may exert an influence on medium A and alter it, thereby enabling it to realize its unique nature and capability for survival. This option would modify A to A1, even though it is still the same technology. The synthesis stage develops if two media converge and create a new medium ($A + B = C$), representing another type of interaction between two given communication media with different characteristics and distinguishable literacy capabilities. Such media are characterized by their ability to perform multiple functions simultaneously and their convergence of traditional media and computer or Web literacy into a unified convergent literacy".⁵

This process takes place in all regions of the world and its speed of propagation is dependent on the performance of communication technologies in each country, but also on the social and cultural context.

Gains and Loses from switching from print to digital editions

As the centre of gravity of general and commercial publications from all parts of the world shifted from print to online, this has also influenced the religious periodicals of all Christian denominations. In the orthodox space, the case of the Greek magazine *Pemptousia* appears to be emblematic, since it gave up a long time ago its printed form and turned into a multilingual spirituality portal which incorporates text and both audio and video recordings, in multimedia constructions.

The benefits of switching from print to online are not at all negligible. Therefore, we should mention a greater visibility and accessibility of content, the possibility of indexing articles in international databases, the overcoming of language barriers through automatic translations of search engines and the reduction of production costs. The possibility to access the collections stored in the virtual space offers visitors not only contact with the latest publications but also with archives and libraries that can be consulted and evaluated directly, for free or at low prices.

The benefits of new technologies seem to establish the belief that the Internet will completely replace printing in the shortest possible time, while the books and periodicals printed on paper will soon become rarities and museum exhibits. Nevertheless, several analyses of the real effects of Internet use on the

⁵ Hillel Nossek, Hanna Adoni & Galit Nimrod, „Is Print Really Dying? The State of Print Media Use in Europe”, *International Journal of Communication* 9(2015), 368.

human mind have revealed differences between paper reading and screen reading, even if the producers of tablets and e-book readers invent new applications and devices that perfectly simulate book or newspaper pages. The problems are related to the risks of superficial reading, the disturbances of the processes of memorization, attention and concentration.

The connected person reads little⁶, motivated by the fact that the reading time is replaced by radio and television broadcasts, Internet surfing, messages and conversations on the smart phone. The two types of reading differ in duration, attention and concentration. Reading on paper is active, it requires participation and concentration on the part of the human being, while reading on the screen predisposes to passivity.

The text is received as an image on the screen; the computer favours the sense of sight to the detriment of reflexivity. *Homo sapiens* thus becomes *homo videns*⁷, man changes from actor into spectator. In this regard, Nicholas Carr writes: "When a printed book - either a recently published academic work of history or a Victorian novel from two hundred years ago - is transferred to an electronic device connected to the Internet, it becomes something very similar to a website. Its words are shrouded in all the temptations of attention on the connected computer. Its links and other digital incentives propel the reader back and forth. The book loses what, in his old age, John Updike called its borders and dissolves into the vast and choppy waters of the Internet. The linearity of the printed book is shattered, along with the calm attention it induces in the reader. The high-tech features of devices such as the Kindle and Apple's new iPad may increase the likelihood that we will read e-books, but the way we read them will be very different from the way we read print editions"⁸.

Even if one can skim through a book or a newspaper, reading on the screen is associated with the shape of the letter F, hurried, agitated and superficial, with memorization efficiency five times lower than reading texts printed on paper. Paradoxically, digital readers spend more time on pages, as their attention is always drawn to hypertext, cross-references, and the flow of messages that appear on the device in real time and require multitasking.

Jean-Claude Larchet points out that the democratization of content posting on popular or academic digital encyclopaedias (such as *wikipedia.org* or *academia.edu*), contributes to cultural and university levelling in the absence of any filters of competency and scientific authority⁹.

⁶ Jean-Claude Larchet, *Malades des nouveaux médias* (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 2016), 56-65.

⁷ Giovanni Sartori, *Homo videns: Imbecilizarea prin televiziune și post-gândirea* [Homo videns: Televisione e Post-Pensiero], translated by Mihail Elin (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2005).

⁸ Nicholas Carr, *Superficialii*, 147.

⁹ Jean-Claude Larchet, *Malades des nouveaux médias*, 53.

An extreme aspect of the immersive paradigm of the Internet is represented by the pseudo-religious manifestations of the idolatry of technologies, observed in the studies of the sociology of communication: "The widespread use of new technological artefacts in our everyday environments brought about two peculiar phenomena: the omnipresence of technology within the niche and a dramatic incrementation in the niche's predictive capacities. As a matter of fact, on the one hand we are surrounded by digital artefacts, accumulating an astonishing quantity of data and information of every kind, while, on the other hand, those same artefacts can interfere with our preferences and habits, as they continually monitor our behaviours. But these phenomena can be witnessed to take place in the digitized religious niche and could be responsible for interesting changes in our relationship with spirituality, especially after the massive advent of the Internet and the so-called Web 2.0 and its hunger for user generated content"¹⁰.

The religious publications, between the nostalgia of the printing press and the network facilities

The information society has generalized its digitization processes in all areas of activity and, implicitly, in the use of media by religious denominations around the world. The number of Orthodox sites and pages in social networks, official or assumed by private initiatives, has increased exponentially. The radio and the television stations of the Romanian Orthodox Church have expanded their broadcasting area from the local to the global level, through the Internet¹¹.

As far as the printed media is concerned, a progressive evolution of 20 years was followed by a period of stagnation and, then, by a decline in editions and titles. Three directions have emerged:

a) The main religious magazines, *Ziarul Lumina*, the daily journal of the Romanian Patriarchate, and some traditional diocesan publications continue to have as main support the printed editions, but they are also open to the presence in digital media.

b) The academic theological journals published by the faculties of theology in partnership with the Church place the online editions in the foreground while the printed form remains in the background.

¹⁰ Tommaso Bertolotti and Carolina Cinerari, „The Gospel according to Google: the future of religious niches and technological spirituality”, *European Journal of Science and Technology*, February 2013, Vol. 9, no. 1, 42+43.

¹¹ Nicolae Dascalu (editor), *The Basilica Press Center: Orthodox Media Ministry in the Early 3rd Millennium* (Bucharest: Basilica, 2014), 35-69.

c) A series of periodicals made by dioceses, parishes, educational units or Christian associations have ceased to appear in the print form and have given way to websites and pages in social networks, with the desire to establish interactive connections with the community members, especially with the younger generation. Nowadays, while undergoing the pandemic with the new coronavirus, the adoption of new communication technologies has shown their efficiency, far superior to printed publications.

It has become a reality that students and pupils use digital encyclopaedias and web resources as primary sources of documentation for their homework preparation and theological research papers, before consulting books and magazines in traditional libraries.

Conclusions

Everywhere around the world, the supremacy of digital media that dominates modern communication leaves less and less room for printed culture. The digitization of old libraries, the emergence of e-books and online migrated publications is clear evidence to the irreversible path towards the decline of the Gutenberg galaxy.

For 500 years, Christianity has used the printing press in the work of cultivating the word of God, by using books of worship and spiritual teaching, but also periodicals, addressing new issues in society and interfaith debates and confrontations. The liturgical solemnities include readings and processions in which the Holy Gospel, in printed form, represents the connection between the visible and the invisible, the material and the spiritual.

The spiritual materiality of the religious books contributed, alongside the icons and other objects of worship, to the definition of the sacred space of encounter with God and the fellow men, in the light of faith. The religious newspapers and magazines are an extension in the secular space of the thinking sprung from the feelings and deeds of faithful people.

Our Church has remained faithful to the printed editions of Holy Scripture, books of worship, works of the Holy Fathers, books of prayer and spiritual-moral edification, in more than a conservative, traditionalist spirit, specific to Orthodoxy. Regarding the periodicals, the most important ones continue their printed editions. At the same time, publishers are aware that to address the millennials, the generation of digital natives, the minimum requirement is to post content in PDF format in the virtual space.

In any transition, the balance between tradition and technological renewal represents an expression of spiritual discernment. It remains essential that, by moving from the linear, hierarchical world of the books and the printed periodicals to the universe of ubiquitous connectivity and proximity of the Internet, we do not lose the spiritual content of our salvation in Christ.

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