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Religious organizations as media settlers.
Strategies towards the trends of deep mediatization

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Religious organizations as media settlers. Strategies towards the trends of deep mediatization

1 Introduction

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown-type control measures, both collective and individual actors, including religious ones (Campbell, 2020; Hall and Kołodziejska, 2021), have been forced to move their practice to online spaces. However, the digitalization of all areas of human life, although of increased intensity nowadays, is hardly a new phenomenon, nor is the social research on this process and its effects. Already before the pandemic, studies of mediatization had grown into an established academic field. Hepp (2016) coined the term ‘deep mediatization’ that invites the analysis of how the media, especially digital ones, saturate the everyday experience of individuals, collectivities and organizations. Specific concepts and research approaches have also been developed in the area of studies of mediatization and religion, the examples being ‘religious-social shaping of technology’ (RSST) (Campbell, 2010) and later ‘religious digital creatives’ (Campbell, 2021). Studies of how religious actors use the digital media and shape them have added to a broader current of actor-centered mediatization research (Krotz, 2009; Hepp et al., 2017) that proposes an alternative to the media-centered approach drawing on Hjarvard’s (2011, 2014) institutional mediatization theory. Still, there is space for further conceptualizations of the religious actors’ engagement with the digital media.

This paper follows the actor-centered approach in the studies on mediatization and religion with the aim to introduce the concept of ‘media settlers’ that refers to how organizational actors, such as Churches, actively use and shape the digital media and respond to trends and consequences of deep mediatization. In doing so, media settlers aim to expand the reach of the content in a controlled manner and prevent misinformation by deploying several strategies, including the replication of content, and the mass-mediatization of digital media. They use technology in a specific way, sometimes contrary to how it was designed or envisioned by those who developed it. With such processes, they are no longer passive actors but become an active part of the societal change in times of deep mediatization.

The need for this new concept comes from the recognition that the existing notions do not enable an accurate interpretation of the data derived from our research on how selected Churches use the media. Nevertheless, the concept of media settlers and the theoretical perspective behind it are based on the previous work in the field of mediatization and religion, in particular the RSST framework. Our intervention should thus be understood as a proposal for enhancing this framework so that it embraces an increased variety of engagements with the digital media by religious organizations.

2 Studying religion in times of deep mediatization

Mediatization, understood as a ‘metaprocess’ that makes human practices increasingly reliant upon media and ‘molded’ by them (Krotz, 2009), has been observed for decades. In recent years, characterized by the rapid development of digital media, this process has accelerated dramatically and brought about a profound change in both the media landscape and modes of communication. Some sociologists, like Castells (2001), proposed to

see this transformation as a cultural shift towards the ‘culture of the internet’. Hepp (2016, 2020) introduced the notion of ‘deep mediatization’ that does justice to ‘the overall digitalization and connectivity of various “old” media and the emergence of “new” digital ones’ (Hepp et al., 2017: 14) and the far-reaching entanglement of media technologies with everyday practices by individual and collective actors.

In times of deep mediatization, the actors are confronted with specific trends in the media environment. Hepp and Hasebrink (2018) list the following: differentiation of a vast amount of technologically-based media of communication; increasing connectivity of and through these media, which offers the possibility to individually and collectively ‘link’ across space and time; the rising omnipresence of media that creates the possibility to connect permanently and everywhere; the rapid pace of innovation; the emergence of ‘new’ media and services in ever-shorter periods of time; the datafication, that is, representing social life through computerized data produced by media devices and their underlying software and infrastructure. These trends can lead to certain consequences at the level of societal organization and practice, such as optionality, new chances for participation or segmentation.

Following Castells (2001, 2012), some studies (Hjarvard, 2016; Campbell and Garner, 2016; Cheong, 2018) presupposed that the growing differentiation, connectivity, and omnipresence of digital media have a tremendous influence on all possible organizations, Churches being no exception. In particular, they expected the religious organizations to be pressured to adapt network-like structures, which came from the recognition that networks are more flexible than traditional structures, can more easily adjust to a new, increasingly dynamic social world, and are ‘more efficient and effective than hierarchies at achieving collective goals’ (Howard, 2011: 24). Related to this, a change was anticipated in religious authority construction - now, it would involve optionality, contingency and new chances of participation.

Indeed, there is evidence that Churches and other religious organizations give in to trends and consequences of deep mediatization and even strengthen them. They consciously and strategically engage with digital media: websites, Twitter, blogs, social networks, wikis, video platforms such as YouTube, and even video games. It has also been observed that laypersons actively produce religious knowledge, and this production often takes place within communication practices that do not involve traditional religious authorities, such as priests and higher officials (Cheong, 2014; Kołodziejska, 2018; Evolvi, 2020). Other research suggests, however, that religious authority is not simply weakened, but subject to transformation processes on various levels (Radde-Antweiler et al., 2018; Radde-Antweiler and Grünenthal, 2020). Therefore, it is worth asking how religious organizations seek ways to protect traditional authority structures in times of deep mediatization. At the same time, it is noteworthy to analyze the exact relationship between trends of deep mediatization and Churches’ media activities. Crucial seems the way the Churches use and negotiate digital media. If, following Hepp and Hasebrink (2018), we distinguish between the *media environment*, which stands for any media available in society at a specific time, the *media ensemble*, which refers to the media used in a specific social domain, such as religion, and the *media repertoire*, which is the media used by individual actors as part of their everyday practices, then is there any difference in how the obvious rapid change in the media environment translates to the Churches’ media ensemble and believers’ media repertoire? Having this in mind, it is worth to look deeper at the trends and consequences of deep mediatization in order to check if they are equally relevant for and similarly responded to by different religious actors’ constellations: individuals, collectivities and organizations.

Whether or not we find these issues relevant depends on how we conceive the relationship between media and religion, or any other area of the social. Hjarvard's (2011, 2014) institutional mediatization theory is based on the concept of 'media logic' and assumes that different fields of society, such as religion, politics, or economics, are determined by the inherent logic of the media. Studies that focus on the ways in which religious organizations and believers mirror the trends of mediatization often draw on Hjarvard's mediatization approach (Evolvi, 2018; Lövheim, 2011). This theoretical perspective however, does not allow for the engagement with the questions above.

These questions can be addressed by shifting the focus from media-centered considerations towards the socio-constructivist understanding of mediatization advocated by Krotz and Hepp (2011; Krotz, 2009; Couldry and Hepp, 2013; for religion see Radde-Antweiler 2012, 2018). Within this approach, media are seen as deeply entangled with micro-level relationships between people and macro-level nets of meaning-making; they are not an isolated institution but a phenomenon connected to the changing communication forms. Consequently, research pertaining to the socio-constructivist tradition, rather than being interested in how the 'media logic' influences the social world, studies everyday communication practices and the changing communicative construction of society and particular areas of the social. Instead of taking specific media (e.g., television, internet) as an object of investigation, it employs an actor-centered approach. It focuses on social actors and their mediatized worlds and on the ways in which they use and shape the media. This is where we situate our study: we start with specific actors, that is, Churches, and by investigating their media ensembles, we ask how they use the media, in particular digital ones, and react to trends and consequences of deep mediatization.

3 Actor-centered research on religion and the media

Studies that employ the actor-centered approach to research on mediatization, and mediatization and religion, have scrutinized three modes of engagement with the digital media: development of media-related technologies, selective use of the media, and the adjustment of media technologies to the actors' goals.

Research with a focus on developers of media-related technologies has led to putting forward the notions of 'media-related pioneer communities' (Hepp, 2016) and 'religious digital creatives' (Campbell, 2021), both referring to digital innovators. The media-related pioneer communities are constituted by technical means of communication and perfectly exemplify post-traditional communities of loose network structure and trans-local activity. Their engagement with digital media defines them. They understand themselves as pioneers for being 'ahead of their time' and bringing change to the construction of collectivities linked to media technologies, 'they also have a sense of mission: a sense that they are at the "forefront" of a media-related transformation of society as a whole' (Hepp, 2016: 920). Campbell's (2021) notion of 'digital creatives' refers specifically to the media innovators affiliated with religious organizations and groups. They are designers and content producers whose digital media work grants them unique status and influence within their communities. The analytical focus of Campbell's study of religious digital creatives is on how their digital work is positioned in relation to those communities.

Both concepts ascribe innovation and creativity to individuals, or their networks, and focus on the digital media workers' groundbreaking activity in the field of media technologies' development. Implicitly, they suggest that the active role in this field is played by those special individuals, whereas established organizations, such as Churches, may be at best passive recipients and replicators of the developments worked out by the creatives. Even if they leave the question of engagement with the digital media at the organizational

level open, they implicitly characterize the organizations as devoid of agency in dealing with digital media and taking part in the changes brought by deep mediatization.

The second actor-centered mediatization research focus is on practices of avoidance or rejection of the digital media by individual and collective actors. Based on her research on Orthodox Jews in Israel, Campbell (2011) identified religious leaders’ attempts to constrain internet use to minimize its potential threat to religious social norms and the structure of authority. Campbell and Golan (2011) spoke about ‘digital enclaves’ that filter information and restrict internet use. On a more general level, Roitsch (2017) put forward the notion of ‘communicative demarcation’ which stands for intentional communicative practices of non-communication or limited communication with the media in the sense of de-mediatization. Roitsch discussed three related actions: rejecting media communication, the allocation of a certain time budget for media communication, and the separation of areas of life with specific media communication. ‘Communicative demarcation’ accurately describes forms of disengagement with the digital media nowadays. The problem is, however, that it implies an either-or vision of approaching the media: it builds on the alternative between accepting or rejecting some forms of media communication, and it does not leave space for reflecting on the ways of use influencing the style of communication intended by specific media technologies.

The dichotomy between acceptance and rejection may be nuanced by the third focus which considers negotiation-based forms of engagement with (digital) media (Golan and Campbell, 2015; Tsuria and Campbell, 2019). Campbell (2010) introduced the concept of ‘religious-social shaping of technology’ (RSST) which adapts the ‘social shaping of technology’ research approach developed in the area of ICT studies (Williams and Edge, 1996) to address religious users and uses. In contrast to studies driven by ideas of techno-economic rationality and linear concepts of technology development, the RSST shifts the focus to actors who use and actively shape technology for their own purposes, including the religion-related goals. Not only does it mitigate the shortcomings of the ‘communicative demarcation’ approach, but it also recognizes the active role of religious actors in using innovative media technologies.

However, when adding religion to the ‘social shaping of technology’ consideration of how technologies are created, shaped, used and negotiated in societies that make and employ them, the RSST focuses on how the technologies are conceived of and used in light of religious beliefs, spiritual and moral codes, and historical tradition of engagement with media technologies. What characterizes the RSST is therefore the emphasis on theology and how it guides technological innovation. Issues beyond theology, for instance those related to the economy or religious organizations’ positioning in the broader social field, are considered to a very limited degree. This opens up space for new conceptualizations. The space is open all the more widely if we take into account that in her own empirical application of the RSST, Campbell focuses on the media repertoire that involves specific types of the media, such as the kosher cell phone (Tsuria and Campbell, 2019) or discussion fora on Israeli religious websites (Golan and Campbell, 2015), losing sight of the whole media ensemble, that is, all types of the media used by religious organizations.

In sum, the actor-centered mediatization research in general, and the research on mediatization and religion in particular, sketched a map of the territory of religious actors’ engagement with the digital media, still they left certain spaces unrecognized. They identified digital innovators and creatives (Hepp, 2016; Campbell, 2021), but at the same time, built a gap between creative individuals and religious organizations devoid of significant characteristics of creativity. The studies also identified those who reject the digital media use (Campbell, 2011) and those who negotiate their engagement with the digital media (Campbell, 2010). The latter focus could potentially bridge the gap between

innovation/creativity and activity ascribed to individuals on the one hand, and passivity attributed to organizational actors on the other. The problem is, however, that the negotiation by religious organizations has been described in a very specific way: as centered around selected media technologies and based mainly on theological principles. The concept of ‘media settlers’ introduced in this paper basically follows the RSST framework, but at the same time, it gives prominence to the neglected aspects of engagement with the digital media. It refers to the whole media ensemble employed by religious organizations, and rather than focusing on theology, it highlights the practices of keeping traditional authority structures in response to the trends and consequences of deep mediatization.

4 Methods

Our research covered the Seventh-Day Adventist Church (SDA) in Poland and the UK, the Polish Autocephalous Orthodox Church (PAOC), Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Thyateira and Great Britain, and Russian Orthodox Diocese of Sourozh in the UK. We analyzed the whole variety of the Churches’ media ensembles and we conducted interviews with Church media producers.

The SDA Church owns a number of official TV and radio channels (in total, over 130) which operate globally, including the US-based Hope Channel (TV), or Adventist World Radio. In Poland, there is the Adventist radio station *Głos Nadziei* [The Voice of Hope], and *Nadzieja.tv* [Hope.tv], a TV production channel, both available online (via YouTube and websites). The Church regularly participates in a 10-minute show on the national Polish radio (Channel 1) *Churches in Poland and abroad*, dedicated to various religious minorities. However, the Church has no access to public television like the PAOC, therefore it is reliant on its own resources in terms of media production and broadcast. A lot of its content is available online, which includes radio broadcast, streaming of services on YouTube channels of *Głos Nadziei* and *Nadzieja.tv*, as well as social media: the Church has the official page on Facebook¹, and numerous local congregations have their own pages (e.g., the congregation in Warsaw²). Some congregations are also present on Instagram. On top of that, the Church has a number of official websites, including *adwent.pl*. As far as print media is concerned, the Polish Adventist magazines in broad circulation are *Znaki Czasu* [Signs of the Times], *Głos Adwentu* [The Voice of Advent], and *Lekcje Biblijne* [Biblical Lessons] (designed for individual Bible studies). In the UK, the main Adventist magazine is *The Messenger*, which during the pandemic moved entirely online, *Focus Magazine*, and the now-closed *Encounter*, dedicated to Adventist youth. The Adventist Radio London is by far the most popular UK-based SDA radio station, and Hope Channel UK is the UK-based branch of the global Hope Channel TV station. The UK Church also owns a number of official websites (incl. *adventist.uk*), YouTube channels (incl. the South England Conference³), and numerous social media pages of Conferences (regions in the UK) and local congregations.

The media ensemble of the PAOC consists of different media formats such as broadcasting, printing magazines, local websites, and social media. As the second biggest religious community in Poland, the PAOC enjoys some privileges in the media environment, for instance broadcasting religious services on national TV (TVP). There is also a radio channel in Eastern Poland, Radio Orthodoxia. The PAOC publishes a monthly magazine *Wiadomości Polskiego Autokefalicznego Kościoła Prawosławnego* [News from the PAOC, *WPAKP*] and it runs an official webpage *orthodox.pl*. On the other hand, the PAOC has neither an official Facebook page, nor a YouTube channel. Furthermore, there are other significant Orthodox media that are recognized by the Church: a monthly journal *Przegląd Prawosławny* [Orthodox Review] with circulation larger than *WPAKP*, and the biggest Orthodox website in

Polish named *cerkiew.pl*. Both media closely cooperate with the PAOC: *cerkiew.pl* team has an agreement with the Church to republish news from their official website and half of the members of the *Przegląd Prawosławny* editorial board are PAOC priests. The Churches in the UK do not produce materials for the BBC, but the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Thyateira cooperates with the London Greek Radio in preparing religious broadcasts. The Thyateira diocese runs an official Facebook page and has its own YouTube channel. Every parish has the right to develop its own media, and indeed many of them have created Facebook pages and websites. The Russian Orthodox Diocese of Sourozh also publishes materials online using different platforms and social media. Some parishes have their own Facebook pages and websites. The Diocese publishes videos on YouTube under the name *sourozh-tv*.

For this article, we focused specifically on digital media and employed content analysis (Mayring, 2000) in order to clarify how the Churches react to the trends of deep mediatization. At the same time, we had the whole media ensemble of the SDA and Orthodox Churches in mind to have reference points and observe cross-mediated strategies. For the same purpose, we conducted episodic interviews (Flick, 1997) with Church media producers such as media departments’ directors, editors, independent creators, and technical staff: eight persons per Church and per country, in two rounds with a one-year interval (2019 and 2020), totaling 64 interviews. For the interview material we employed discourse analysis (Keller, 2013).

5 Media Settlers

The actor-centered research on mediatization and religion has so far neglected the use of media by religious organizations, possibly due to the assumption of their predominantly passive reception of and adaptation to the trends in mediatization. However, in our research on the media production of Orthodox and Adventist Churches, it became obvious that neither fit the description. In contrast to a passive and adapting role, both organizations develop various strategies for dealing with trends and consequences of deep mediatization. However, unlike the ‘digital creatives’ or the ‘media-related pioneer communities’, these organizations do not typically work out innovative technologies: instead, they implement specific strategies for approaching digital media that allow them to maintain their authority. Some of them become visible only when we take into account the whole media ensemble of the Churches: we may then observe how the Churches make use of digital media, such as, for instance, Instagram.

Designed for picture and video sharing, Instagram has become one of the most popular social media formats globally, where aside from individuals sharing their photos with friends, countless celebrities and influencers promote their work, products, and services. However, when a local congregation manages an Instagram account solely to publish inspirational Bible quotes and Church announcements, without making use of the video or messaging features that the service offers, then it follows its own goals, regardless of the array of choices offered by the service. This can be considered a strategy of adapting to the trends of deep mediatization, because it is a conscious decision to choose the medium to post certain types of content, which have a direct purpose (inspiring members of the congregation, reminding them of their daily Bible reading, informing them about Church events, etc.), and whose publication is authorized by the congregation and/or its authorities. By using the Instagram account to fulfill its own goals, the congregation is not in conflict with the creators of Instagram, nor does this activity undermine the position of Instagram in the media environment. It does not imply, for instance, that other users will follow suit and stop posting photos and videos. However, by using the medium in a certain

way only, the congregation follows a different pattern of its use, one which is guided primarily by the goals of the religious institution, and not by other aims, such as attracting sponsors.

In order to acknowledge the variety of strategies deployed by the religious organizations and their creative approach to media use, we introduce the concept of *media settlers*. They are *organizational actors who, in response to the deep mediatization trends and their consequences, actively shape their media by deploying strategies aiming to expand their organization, and at the same time to preserve and assert authority, and maintain unity of their communities*. The strategies that the Churches deploy are not dependent on any particular medium, that is, they are not observed only on websites or YouTube, but can be identified within the whole media ensemble of the organizations.

6 Strategies of media settlers

Religious organizations as media settlers deployed particular strategies towards emerging media long before the times of deep mediatization, since religion has always been connected to media (one should mention the strategies of the Roman Catholic Church against the printing press or later the television, for instance). In this paper, the focus is on deep mediatization and the strategies deployed by the two Churches in response to its trends. While some of these strategies may be applicable to various historical media contexts and environments, this topic requires a comparative analysis whose scope goes beyond our research, and in consequence also this paper.

The identified strategies are:

1. Acknowledgement
2. Omission
3. Authorization of media
4. Replication of media formats
5. Mass-mediatization of digital media

The strategy of *acknowledgement* represents the conscious use of media by the Churches, and the awareness of the functions of the media for the Church. It corresponds with the perceived pressure to adjust to the trends of deep mediatization (Hepp et al., 2017). It manifests itself in the multitude of media outlets both Churches manage, which include the digitalization of traditional media (the press, TV, radio - all available online, like Nadzieja.tv), Facebook pages (such as the North England Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, prawoslawie.pl), or YouTube channels (Głos Nadziei, Cerkiew.pl). Moreover, acknowledgement is identified whenever the awareness of the meaning of the media for communicating with members and non-members becomes apparent, as in:

Certainly [during the COVID-19 pandemic] there has been an increased awareness in the Church in general, among the leaders of the Church, that the media are the future. And here, on the one hand, we are lacking a real community, and on the other hand we see that precisely in such crises the media are often the only form of activity that the Church can carry out. So, there is definitely a need to develop these media, to invest more in them, to train people who work in these departments of

Church services. There is also a need, as it were, to raise awareness, perhaps to increase professionalism (Polish interview 1, Adventist, 2020)

The *omission* is a flip side of *acknowledgement*: while particular media formats are used and types of content produced, others are purposefully omitted or ignored. It is akin to the practice of rejection of (some) digital media by religious leaders (Campbell, 2011) and it may be considered a manifestation of ‘communicative demarcation’ (Roitsch, 2017). It is also connected to optionality (Hepp et al., 2017), in the sense that both Orthodox and Adventist Churches select what type of media to engage in, which also influences the media choices of lay people. On the organizational or media format level, this strategy manifests itself in the fact that neither Church uses Twitch or TikTok.

Authorization of media is based on the differentiation between legitimate and illegitimate media sources. It is identified when Churches’ authorities directly or indirectly approve and disapprove of certain media activities, which may range from anything from direct oversight, a publishing agenda, to broader media strategies, which include being present in selective media only. This is not a modern phenomenon as such, and has long reaching historical roots, described at length in works on mediatization and religion (e.g., Krüger, 2018). One example of religious authorization of media may be the well-known *imprimatur* in the Roman Catholic Church, which goes back to the beginnings of the printing press. The authorization of media takes place in our sample as well. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Polish SDA Church issued instructions to pastors, ministers, and laypeople on how to use Zoom, since this communicator was most commonly used for remote Bible studies, meetings, and transmission of events. While the instruction was about technicalities, the mere fact that it was issued may be considered as Zoom’s indirect *authorization*.

The *authorization* of media is also at work whenever normative claims about media types and use are made by Church representatives or in the Church media: those claims determine what form of media use is beneficial, positive, or serves the ‘right’ purposes, and what form does not. For example, the media experts of the Orthodox Churches acknowledge the need for using digital media, especially to reach younger generations. Many of them confirm that the aim of the Church media is to spread the religious message by educating the audiences: ‘To inform, to educate, to connect everything, to entertain. I wouldn’t say that we entertain, but for children, we try to find some interesting stories, which can entertain and teach’ (British interview 1, Orthodox 2019).

The first three strategies fit with the existing research described earlier, and dovetail with the assumption that religious organizations predominantly accept or reject certain forms of media communication, and do not actively participate in the transformations brought about by deep mediatization. However, the following two strategies show that both religious organizations are active and goal-oriented in their media use. Such strategies until now have not been taken into consideration by the concepts identifying the deep mediatization-induced changes within society, partially because they focus mostly on selected media and technologies instead of on the whole media ensembles.

The strategy of *replication of media formats* is implemented whenever the Churches use various media, such as print and digital, to reproduce more of the same content. While the Churches use different media with various affordances, they do so as if the format was uniform and unchanged. They circulate the same content with minor or no changes, which may be understood as an attempt, on the one hand, to broaden the reach of the content (if it appears in more sources, more people can access it), and on the other hand to maintain control over the narrative. An example of *replication* is the series of lectures by an American pastor Mark Finley, produced by the US division of the Adventist Church. In Poland, the same videos, with minor changes (introduction by a Polish pastor, Polish subtitles), were posted

on Głos Nadziei YouTube channel. Moreover, this very same video appeared on the YouTube channel of the local congregation in Łódź, unchanged except for a one-second shorter runtime.



Image 1. Screenshot of the lecture by Mark Finley on Głos Nadziei YouTube channel. Original title (translated to Polish): *Three Cosmic Messages, Earth's Final Conflict*. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/user/GLOSNAZDZIEI/videos>

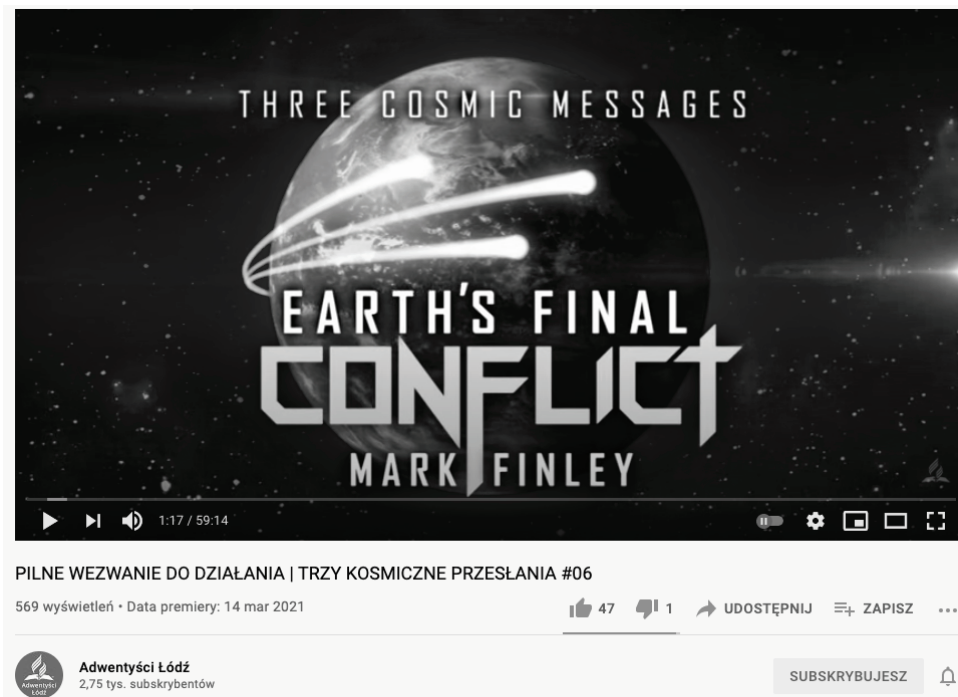


Image 2. Screenshot of the same video, one second shorter, posted to the Adventist Congregation in Łódź YouTube channel. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WBMm5aE9boE>

Next, the link to the video, again in unchanged format and content, was posted on the official Facebook page of the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Poland. The changes made referred to the context: a link was included in a post informing about the lectures, the time of their YouTube premiere, and other Adventist digital media channels.



Image 3. Screenshot of the post on the Facebook page of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church in Poland, which included the link to the lecture, along with some information on where to watch the video. The link in the post comes from the Głos Nadziei YouTube channel. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/Kosciol.Adwentytystow.RP/posts/3681268891949055>

The Orthodox Churches also use the strategy of *replication*, for instance when the news on various events, typically religious services or feasts, are spread through different media channels of the Church. This is the way in which the PAOC reported on the event that took place on 2 May 2016, when a group of clergy and faithful commemorated the murder of Orthodox people in the village of Zawadka Morochowska. In 1946, the village inhabitants were ruthlessly killed by soldiers of the Polish People’s Army in a series of ethnic cleanses. This tragic event was commemorated by a ‘pilgrimage’ to the graves and a religious field-service at the spot. The report from this event was published in the official journal of the PAOC, i.e., *WPAKP* (June 2016: 5), in the *Przegląd Prawosławny* journal (June 2016: 6), as well as on the official webpage of the Church, orthodox.pl. The fragments were only slightly edited/shortened and appeared in all three media channels.

The second strategy not encompassed by the existing actor-centered research on mediation and religion is the *mass-mediatization of digital media*. This strategy pertains to the

type of digital media use which is based on the mass-media, hierarchical chain of communication, where a producer disseminates the content to a large number of recipients (Napoli, 2010). The strategy is connected with limited recipient responsiveness and interaction between recipients, or between them and the content producers. This also implies that the media, regardless of their formats, even if they enable interactivity and user-to-user communication (like social media), are not used in ways which encourage it. Furthermore, *mass-mediatization of digital media* can be observed when the content is presented in an informative style, without eliciting reactions from the readers/viewers, or without responding to comments and questions on a regular basis.

In the Adventist sample, the format of the official Facebook page of the Trans-European Division (TED)⁴ includes many examples of this strategy. While TED, comprising the UK and Poland, among others, is home to 88 thousand Adventists, the Facebook page has approx. 6,700 likes (as of 5 June 2021). Posts on the page generally do not receive more than 15 reactions (i.e. likes, loves, etc.), 10 shares, or 10 comments. Usually the numbers are lower, and the majority of entries are not commented on at all. The posts are typically written in an informative style, often inviting users to view another site, take part in an event, etc. Sometimes they are inspirational quotes from the Bible, typically pasted as images. The vast majority of links are of Church-based organizations, local congregations, or pastors and ministers, including their YouTube channels, social media, etc., and there are few overt incentives to start a discussion, such as open questions, polls, quizzes, or competitions. The interaction between users, or users and the content producers is therefore limited, which results in the overall scarcity of discussions. Furthermore, the different media are not in dialogue with one another, nor do they complement one another by engaging the users in different ways.

The Orthodox Churches deploy the strategy of *mass-mediatization of digital media* in a similar manner. While the Archdiocese of the PAOC represented by the Metropolitan's office does not have an official Facebook page, other dioceses in Poland are free to use this social medium. However, the analysis of the Wrocław-Szczecin Diocese page⁵ makes it clear that it is not used in a truly interactive way. The posts typically disseminate information on the bishop and religious services, are rarely commented on, and receive around 10-15 likes on average. Moreover, the last post on this page is from 23 April 2018 (as of 14 June 2021).

Much like the TED Facebook page, the Orthodox Churches also do not encourage interactivity on their websites. Referring to the PAOC's webpage, an interviewee commented:

This is not a portal, this is a *strictly informational website*, it is the official organ of the Orthodox Church in Poland. [...] Our task is *only to inform* on current events that take place in the Orthodox Church in Poland, on parish life, Church life. (Polish interview 2, Orthodox 2019)

This statement, combined with the fact that no official Church website hosts a user comments section or a discussion forum, adds to the observation that the organizations use the digital media as a means of one-way communication based on the division between the producer of a message and its many recipients, typical for mass media (cf. Napoli, 2010: 509).

The strategy of *mass-mediatization of digital media* can also be observed when interviewees comment on the media formats, making normative statements about them, and sharing their preferences. One of the Adventist media experts values the radio and TV more highly than digital media, criticizing how the shift to digitalization affected the changes in journalism:

Just because the Churches broadcast transmissions of services, via YouTube and so on, *I wouldn't call it media or television, because it's a long way from that.* Unfortunately, today we take *shortcuts on everything*, and someone who buys a camera and connects it to YouTube thinks he's a journalist. This is a whole discussion about citizen journalism, and it sounds nice, but it is far from the truth, and there is a great risk involved in what is transmitted. (Polish interview 3, Adventist 2019)

Interpreting it as the devaluation of traditional media roles (journalist, editor, cameraman, etc.) in the digital context, the interviewee appreciates the pre-digital media organization, which then translates into using digital media as though it resembled these appreciated formats. The interviewee praises the cultivation of the pre-digital understanding of media roles, associating them with high quality, and positions the Church media as maintaining these high standards.

The respondent quoted above also mentions the risk involved in grassroots journalism, alluding to the Church's desired control over the content of its media, and more broadly, over traditional authority structures. Interestingly, however, such control is not something the media experts present as their Churches' official policy. On the contrary: they rather position themselves and their Churches as open to various media formats and technologies, and indeed, they can prove this openness by referring to the Churches' presence in the media such as Facebook, YouTube or Instagram. Furthermore, respondents from both Churches are well aware of the fact that different content should be published in different media, and that digital media have their distinct features and affordances. Nevertheless, they strengthen the mass-mediatization strategy by investing in the 'traditional' media rather than digital media. When explaining the imbalance in investments, they usually point to their unsatisfactory economic condition: 'I'm not very much satisfied with the quantity or the quality of the Orthodox media existing today. [...] But [to improve the situation], you need a huge budget, you need people who would be dedicated to this particular thing' (British interview 2, Adventist 2019). This quite common explanation rationalizes both the prioritization of 'traditional' media and the low engagement with the possibilities offered by the digital media. In the face of limited funds, the media of choice are TV, the press, and the radio, even though they are largely dependent on online broadcast and distribution. Moreover, even if the 'traditional' media is done digitally (i.e., online radio, TV), the digital media usually becomes a tool to distribute the information, rather than a medium appreciated for its interactivity. Hence the limited user engagement and the presence of the producer-recipient chain of communication, which in fact strengthens the traditional structure of authority.

It must be stressed that all the strategies discussed above fulfill similar goals: they are the safeguards against the contingency and optionality of use (cf. Hepp and Hasebrink, 2018). By deploying the strategies, both religious organizations maintain authority and control over their positioning in the religious and political environment, and strengthen the authority of the Church and the clergy. At the same time, the strategies prevent the segmentation of believers and unify them: by controlling the narrative, and ensuring that the content comes from limited sources, the Churches create a unifying discursive realm. In doing so, they deal with the pressure to adjust to new media developments.

All of the strategies also have a normative dimension. Each Church has a different understanding of what good or proper media is, in terms of importance, quality, and effects. The normative dimension implies that there is a presupposed, implicit, or explicitly outlined good and bad, or proper and improper use of media, depending on the goals which this use fulfills. For instance, the Churches may encourage watching religious songs on YouTube, and discourage visiting the channels of popular gamers. They also may, as in the

case of *mass-mediatization of digital media*, value pre-digital media qualifications higher than the digital ones and on that basis distinguish between professional and unprofessional skills and positions. Therefore, by deploying the strategies, the Churches construct a certain ideal of the media ensemble that they want to achieve, and refer to it as an implicit or explicit benchmark for their media activities.

7 Media settlers and power relations

Using digital media to attain organizational goals is what makes the settlers active media users. While from the perspective of digital pioneers, the strategies listed above may not conform to the patterns of media-oriented innovativeness, the settlers' activity is in fact a form of strategic adaptation of digital media. The Churches' goal is not to develop the technology as such, or promote new forms of use (which is what innovators do), but to use digital media in such a way that the organization can expand, develop, and maintain the community regardless of the specific media affordances.

The emphasis on the *organization* means that while a Church as a whole may be identified as a settler, this does not imply that all groups and individuals which are part of it are settlers as well. In fact, there may be a variety of dispositions towards the media, and strategies towards deep mediatization on different levels of the organizations. For instance, within one Church, its congregations may be leaning towards media pioneers more than others, or may/may not deploy certain strategies in contrast to other congregations. This variety does not necessarily affect how the organization as a whole uses the media, which depends on the power relations and the intrinsic structural conditions and constraints.

The power relations are an important aspect of the settlers' activity. The term 'media settlers' may evoke associations with settler colonialism, which implies being active in a certain 'land', in this case the digital media as part of the media environment. The media settlers are in relation to the 'natives', represented by media pioneers (Hepp, 2016) and digital creatives (Campbell, 2021) who create and develop the media and technologies, and create or popularize certain forms of media use. The act of 'settling' is understood as the use and shaping of the 'land', which is based on the aforementioned strategies within the settlers' media ensembles (Figure 1).

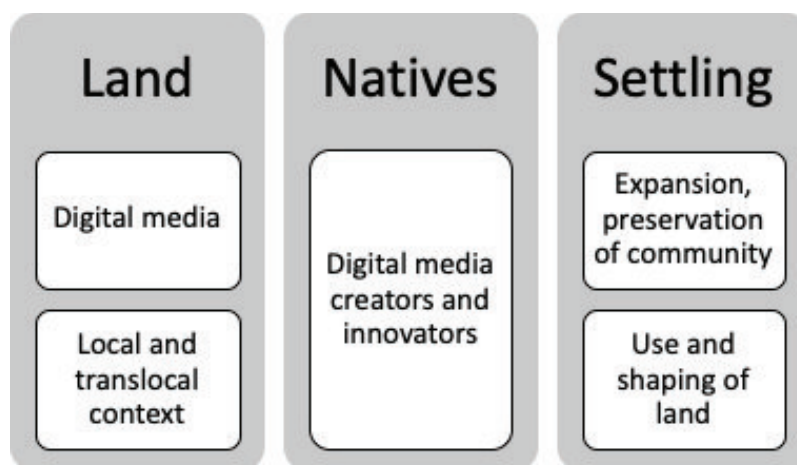


Figure 1. The three aspects of the 'media settlers' concept - the land, the natives, and settling. Source: own elaboration.

In the context of power relations, pertaining especially to the relationship between the settlers and the natives (cf. Wolfe, 2006; Young, 2018), the term settlers is used metaphorically, depicting a structural element of power relations regarding access to digital media. While several anthropological concepts of settlers and settler colonialism point to the destruction and dissolution of native societies (Wolfe, 2006: 388) and the land (also by way of expropriation), media settlers’ strategies do not aim to eradicate the natives as such. When we conceptualize digital media creators and innovators as natives, we challenge the depiction of digital media creators as the dominant force. In the concepts of settler colonialism, the natives are often depicted as powerless/voiceless and dominated. In our case, it is more complex. The natives as digital creators have a lot of power over society in times of deep mediatization. In fact, the concepts of media pioneers and digital creatives assume that others are the subjects of the pioneers’ power and conform to the rules. The media settlers’ concept nuances this assumption. The settlers selectively use and purposefully shape their media, which also gives them power and makes the power relations non-linear.

In the process of media selection, the power of the natives may weaken, however, this pertains to the media ensemble of the settlers, and does not necessarily affect the natives’ power in the media environment as such. Therefore, in specific social domains such as religion, the outcomes of the natives’ work may be colonized by the media settlers, and as such used by the settlers for their own purposes. Moreover, just like the media pioneers, the media settlers have a ‘sense of mission’ (cf. Hepp, 2016: 920), but in their case it is not related to the media per se. While the pioneers consider themselves to be at the forefront of media-related societal transformations, the settlers’ mission is the growth and thriving of the organization. Although this is done with the help of the media, ultimately their use is a means to an end, which is not to be ‘ahead of their time’, but rather to be *timeless*: appealing and relevant regardless of the changing times.

Overall, the concept of media settlers is in sharp contrast to Hjarvard’s (2011, 2014) interpretation of mediatization. The Churches we studied do not necessarily feel pressured in times of deep mediatization to succumb to the ‘logic’ of the newly developed media. In contrast to Castells’ (2012) or Howard’s (2011) studies, our research shows that the Churches do not have to adapt network-like structures to adjust to the changing and dynamic social world, but use digital technology to maintain the traditional structures. Furthermore, the settlers do not simply accept or reject the media, and even if they do, it pertains only to certain forms of media communication, as Roitsch (2017) has stressed. They rather develop creative strategies such as *mass-mediatization of digital media*, although this creativity is not media-oriented (unlike in the case of ‘digital creatives’). Therefore, the media settlers exemplify the social-shaping of technology (Williams and Edge, 1996) by religious actors. At the same time, the concept of media settlers can be used as an analytical tool to go beyond what the RSST (Campbell, 2010) offers, by taking into account the whole media ensemble of a religious organization and comment on the adaptation of the digital media to a variety of organizational goals. Future research will show if the concept holds relevance for secular organizations as well.

8 References

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The screenshots from the Seventh-Day Adventist Church media are published with the consent of the Church’s President, Pastor Marek Rakowski, and the Head of the Media Department, Pastor Daniel Kluska.

11 Notes

- [1] <https://www.facebook.com/Kosciol.Adwentystow.RP> (accessed 11 June 2021).
- [2] <https://www.facebook.com/adwentysciwarszawa> (accessed 11 June 2021).
- [3] <https://www.youtube.com/user/secadventist> (accessed 11 June 2021).
- [4] <https://www.facebook.com/TransEuropeanDivision> (accessed 11 June 2021).
- [5] www.facebook.com/Prawoslawnna-Diecezja-Wroclawsko-Szczecińska-2024431827770622 (accessed 11 June 2021).