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Behind the official website of the Metropolis of Moldavia and Bukovina - philosophy and the sources of inspiration

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Abstract. The phenomenon of *Christianity on the Internet* is widely known and appreciated by most Christian faithful and priests for quite a long time, even though in the beginning it was met with distrust. This proves, once again, that there is no medium of communication totally incompatible with the “Good News” - the Gospels. Regarding the online presence of the Romanian Orthodox Church in general and of the Metropolis of Moldavia and Bukovina in particular, it became clearly evident that a web platform representing the Church, besides its spiritual and dogmatic rigours, had to align itself with the expectations and online habits of the public - in this case of the faithful - to ensure their engagement. That’s why I consider it significant to present the philosophy and some of the initial sources of inspiration that led to the success of *Doxologia.ro*, the official website of the Metropolis of Moldavia and Bukovina, which has now the most readers (an average of 97.027 unique users daily in 2021) of the official and private religious sites in Romania. Thus, my main research questions are: Why is the web platform *Doxologia.ro* a special case regarding Christian mass media in Romania? What are the major concepts from which the platform started? Finally, how can a Christian bimillennial tradition be user friendly?

Keywords. *Doxologia.ro*, religious website, Christian mass media, Romanian Orthodox Church, Christian philosophy of web, iconographical style

1. Introduction

The *Romanian Orthodox Church* began to be present on the Internet in the mid-1990s and has experienced an accelerated expansion in the following years, especially with the development of publicly electronic programs, such as blogs and wiki systems, accessible to everyone with minimal technical skills. These online programs can have a catechetical and missionary function, facilitating the access of those interested in resources that meet their spiritual needs and interests (fundamental texts of the Orthodox tradition, writings and testimonies of contemporary Orthodox believers, iconographic and sacred music resources, news and information of interest to the orthodox world) and it also led to the birth of some orthodox online communities (Conovici, 2010). The accessibility of these resources, the ease of online publication and the relative anonymity of participants online immediately raised the question of the lack of articulation of virtual communities, their depersonalized character, but, more importantly, the question of which is the best way to transmit the Orthodox tradition

through the Internet. It is known that the Internet provides only criteria for quantitative selection and visibility of information, but not for quality or credibility.

The question therefore arises: To what extent does the Orthodox presence on the Internet allow a unitary and Church-valid transmission of tradition? The analysis of the research field at the level of 2010 showed that, on the one hand, the Orthodox blogosphere and the space of discussion groups appeared to be uncontrollable in terms of content. On the other hand, the traditional hierarchy of the Church was also found on the Internet - priests, monks, but especially laypeople (among whom a large number of students or theological graduates) - and in the most cases, they were people for whom living the Orthodox faith was not only the reflection of ancestral tradition but a path assumed by personal choice, with missionary enthusiasm and readiness. It was found that, apart from a few extreme cases, which, although visible, remained isolated, the massive and vocal presence of Orthodox laity within online communities did not prevent the presence in the online space of figures that represent the traditional authorities of the Romanian Orthodox (Conovici, 2010).

2. The media context

In 2010, in Romania, there was a lot of online information about Church teachings and events, but promotion, organization and systematization were weak. Most online references to the Church activities were published on official sources, endorsed by the hierarchical authority, but there were also numerous online websites of theological and spiritual content, private or anonymous, but which, not knowing the exact intentions behind them, could not be said whether they were reliable or stable sources. Most of the owners of such religious sites probably only aimed at achieving high traffic levels, without regard to other moral or dogmatic principles.

After several positive communicative experiences at the level of some of its dioceses, the Romanian Patriarchate amplified its mission during that period by using modern media, but not as a substitute for traditional pastoral care, which favours direct pastoral contact between priest and faithful, but as technical support to make known in society the liturgical, cultural, catechetical, social and philanthropic life of the Church. On October 27, 2007, on the feast of Saint Demetrios the New, Protector of Bucharest, the *Basilica Media Centre of the Romanian Patriarchate* was established, with its head office in the Palace of the Patriarchate in Bucharest. The *Basilica Media Centre* currently includes the following components: *Radio Trinitas*, *Trinitas TV*, *Lumina (The Light) Publications*, *Basilica News Agency* and the *Press office* (Dascălu, 2012). All the components of the *Basilica Media Centre* were, from the beginning, financially supported by the Patriarchal Administration, the Archdiocese of Bucharest and the majority of dioceses in the country and abroad, through the deaneries, parishes and monasteries, as well as through personal donations of the faithful, developing their missionary activity of the Church's activities and projects (Patriarch Daniel, 2010). *Basilica Media Centre* logo was the patriarchal cross, surrounded by five concentric circles of different colours (blue, yellow, ruby-red, emerald, chalcedony-blue), which symbolically represent the five components, from inside to outside, respectively *Radio Trinitas*, *Trinitas TV*, *Lumina (The Light) Publications*, *Basilica News Agency* and the *Press office*.

3. The first attempts

The *Doxologia* media project officially started on July 1, 2010, with the blessing of His Eminence Teofan, Metropolitan of Moldavia and Bukovina and by the decision of the Diocesan Council of the Archdiocese of Iași, which approved the establishment of the *Doxologia Cultural and Missionary Centre* within the Cultural Department of the Archdiocese of Iași, which took

over and reorganized the former *TRINITAS Cultural Missionary Institute*. Among other components, the *Doxologia Cultural and Missionary Centre* also included the *Department of Media Doxologia*. In turn, *Media Doxologia*, included, in addition to the Moldavia edition of the *Lumina* newspaper, a new component, with activity exclusively on the web: *Doxologia.ro* portal¹. As a novelty, in addition to the editorial office that generated content, three programming posts were also provided in the department for developing the necessary web platforms for the Archdiocese of Iași's other departments.

The software development department existed since the autumn of 2009 when there were hired two programmers, who started the development of the first *Doxologia.ro* platform. The project was coordinated, at an informal level, by the hierodeacon Seraphim Pantea, a monk at Golia Monastery, which had a radically open-source development vision. The first *Doxologia.ro* platform practically mimics the *Google* search page. Thus, on the first page of *Doxologia.ro*, the first variant, the reader was greeted by a search field and had to query the platform whether or not it owns a certain content. The second variant of the platform *Doxologia.ro*, although superior to the first one, because it had an interface with titles and images, still seemed outdated and unattractive. Basically, the programmers created an "orthodox website", as they understood. The results had not been satisfactory: Between June 1 and September 30, 2010, the average of unique users daily was below 300.

4. Sources of inspiration

Starting on November 1, 2010, the coordination of *Doxologia Media* became the responsibility of deacon Nicolae Hulpoi, the former editor-in-chief of *Lumina de Duminică (Sunday Light)* weekend edition. In the first weeks of November 2010, an analysis of the web platform was made; the focus, of course, was first on the *Doxologia.ro* platform that existed at the time. The conclusion was that it was necessary to develop a new platform, taking as much as possible from the database of the old site.

The old *Doxologia.ro* platform had been designed around the idea that it must be "traditionalist", "orthodox", "spiritual". The new director of *Doxologia Media* asked that all these prejudices be abandoned, considering them completely baseless because a web platform cannot be absolutely traditionalist, neither orthodox nor spiritual. In fact, the serious confusion between form and content was exposed: the content had to align to ideological, diplomatic and dogmatic requirements, but the online presentation online had to be consistent with the tastes, expectations and the online informational habits of the public. Thus, the keywords of the new platform *Doxologia.ro* have become "modern", "attractive", "user-friendly" and "cool factor".

During the analysis, it was noticed that among Christian sites, sources of inspiration were very few. Most Christian sites were technically outdated and flagrantly contradicted the dynamics of content dislocation in a period that was already dominated by social media. The only Christian site that attracted attention was *christianpost.com*, which also became one of the sources of content, through translation and adaptation. Very soon it became very clear that sources of inspiration must be searched in other areas. Thus, after two weeks of analysis, at the beginning of December, a collection of sites was created that deserved to be followed in the

¹ Most of the information in this chapter and the following were obtained by the qualitative interview method from Nicolae Hulpoi, director of *Doxologia Media* from November 2010 to April 2013. A comprehensive and journalistic presentation of *Doxologia.ro* web project I have made in the volume *Tradiții ale presei religioase din România (Traditions of the religious press in Romania)*, coordinated by Țăgșorean Carmen and Rad Ilie, Cluj-Napoca, The Cluj University Press Publishing House, 2017.

configuration of the new *Doxologia.ro*, the most important being: *reuters.com*, *economist.com*, *telegraph.co.uk*, *washingtonpost.com*, *nytimes.com*, *lacroix.com*, *christianpost.com*.

For example, the header that imposed itself with brand force in the minds of *Doxologia.ro* users, with the combination of red in the logo, the menu reduced to two large category buttons and the fragment of the famous *Ladder of Virtue* from Sucevița Monastery was an ingenious reformulation of the *reuters.com* header from the platform before 2012.

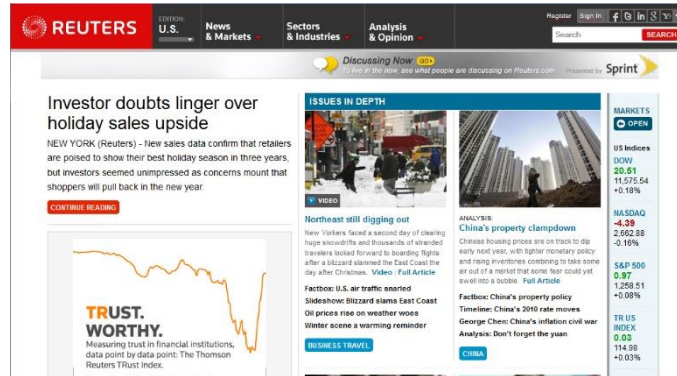


Figure 1: *Reuters.com* header, December 2010



Figure 2: *Reuters.com* header model, reinterpreted for *Doxologia.ro*

Another challenge was to set up the first page. The final choice, a mosaic structure, at first glance somewhat anarchic, was inspired by *telegraph.co.uk*. The apparent disorder on the first page was at stake, at least during the development phase, to camouflage the small amount of content that *Doxologia.ro* received daily. In the first months of 2011, regular users noticed the small number of articles that appeared daily, but users who first accessed *Doxologia.ro*, or visited it two or three times a week, were impressed by a large amount of information available.

The new *Doxologia Media* director realized that the new platform would address primarily the reader with a medium and sub-average theological culture, which had 5-10 minutes daily to spend on *Doxologia.ro*. As a result, the new journalistic format became clear: the tabloid. Of course, *tabloid-style*, in *Doxologia.ro* approach, meant a certain “packaging” of the content, which involved an interesting title, a suggestive image (or more) and content quality, but of limited length. Starting from this journalistic approach, it soon became evident the conclusion that tabloid-style was within easy reach. It was a “revelation” to find that the condensed tabloid way of communication had been practised by the Orthodox Church for centuries in an iconographic manner, and it could be observed in any typical interior of a

Byzantine-style church, where formally the same format is found (images and titles) as on the cover of a newspaper.

5. A new web philosophy

5.1. The name

The name of the web portal - *Doxologia* - although it had been chosen at the same time as the establishment of the *Doxologia Cultural and Missionary Centre* (the word *doxologia* comes from the Greek *doxa*, meaning glory, and *logos*, meaning word or speaking) it had no explanation, being considered by many too consonant. For this reason, a tagline was added to the *Doxologia.ro* name - *joy and confession of faith* - the phrase is taken from the work of Saint Maximus the Confessor:

“So long as the soul advances «from strength to strength» (Ps. 84:7) and «from glory to glory» (2 Cor. 3:18), that is, so long as it advances from one degree of virtue to a greater degree and from one level of spiritual knowledge to a higher level, it remains a «sojourner», one who has no permanent home, as in the saying, «My soul has long been a sojourner» (Ps. 120:6. LXX). For great is the distance and many are the levels of knowledge through which the soul must pass before it reaches «the place of the miraculous tabernacle, the house of God itself, with the voice of exultation and thanksgiving, and the sound of feasting» (Ps. 42:4. LXX). It advances continually from one hymn of praise to another, from one level of divine contemplation to another, full of joy and thankfulness for what it has already seen. For all those who have received the Spirit of grace into their hearts celebrate in this festive manner, crying «Abba, Father» (Gal. 4:6). «The place of the miraculous tabernacle» is a dispassionate and untroubled state of virtue in which the Logos of God adorns the soul like a tabernacle with the varied beauties of the virtues. «The house of God» is spiritual knowledge compounded of many different forms of contemplation when God dwells in a soul, filling it from the bowl of wisdom. «Exultation» is the soul's leap of joy at the riches of the virtues. «Thanksgiving» is gratitude for the bountiful outpouring of wisdom. «The sound of feasting» is the unceasing mystical hymn of glory (doxology), which exultation and thanksgiving combine to form” (Saint Maximus the Confessor, Introductory Note. Second Century: 77-78, *The Philokalia*, Vol. Two).

5.2. Information, remembrance and motivation

Regarding the *mission* of the new web portal *Doxologia*, it targeted three main directions: *information*, *remembrance* and *motivation*.

The *informative* concern of the *Doxologia* web portal aimed to promote the events that took place in the monasteries, parishes and institutions of the Metropolis of Moldavia and Bukovina, throughout the Romanian Patriarchate (especially when these were of particular relevance to Church life in Moldavia), but also events from all over the Orthodox and Christian world. Besides the religious content, of theological or spiritual nature, *Doxologia.ro* also showed concern for areas such as education, health, family, and society, especially when the reverberations of events in these areas were extended beyond their domain, having an impact on the moral, spiritual or even Christian Orthodox way of life.

Through *remembrance*, *Doxologia.ro* tried to achieve a necessary and permanent reminder of the past that explains the present and inspires the choices the faithful must make, on a personal and community level, for a future pleasing to God. The belief was that through the constant remembrance of the edifying deeds of the past, the present is safe from the trap of hopelessness, of the absurd, and is placed under the rays of God's providence through which He guides history. Thus, in the *Doxologia* web portal, the historical and eternal images of the

saints of the Church, of the ancestors in the faith, but also of other personalities, orthodox or not, who have dedicated themselves with love and sacrifice to the service of their fellow men were brought to the present.

Through the positive-realistic tone, by avoiding lamentation and by confessing, explicitly or implicitly, the conviction that through the mercy of God “in Him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28)², the *Doxologia* web portal wanted to motivate, to bring hope, to encourage. For this reason, *Doxologia.ro* has made a continuous concern of seeking and presenting people who have overcome obstacles that seemed insurmountable, through hope, faith and ascetical life. It can be said that *Doxologia.ro* has made a mission of promoting human success, whether it has been materialized by the dignified conduct of suffering or by the humble assumption and generous management of social success, both situations being, in the light of the Holy Gospel, equally sure paths for the attainment of salvation.

5.3. The taxonomy

Regarding the content formats, *Doxologia.ro* published in a variety of journalistic genres, such as news, editorials, reportage, photo reportage, documentary, interview, and analysis. The possibilities of multimedia and social media communication were also explored. As for the production studio *Doxologia TV*, it focused mainly on two directions: the production of video materials for the TV show *Pridvoarele credinței*, produced in partnership with the local broadcaster TVR Iași, and the recording of conferences, sermons and events for the *Doxologia* site.

In the *About us* section of the site were mentioned the main members of the *Doxologia Media* team: Priest Constantin Sturzu - the head of the Cultural Department of the Archdiocese of Iași, Deacon Nicolae Hulpoi - director of Doxology Media, Priest Ionuț Istrati - editor-in-chief, Priest Adrian Chelaru - editor, Oana Hulpoi, Magda Buftea, Crina Zamfirescu - programmers, Viorel Cățusanu - image operator, Priest Marian Timofte, the head of the Administrative Department and contributor at the *Network of Archdiocese of Iași parishes sites*, Archimandrite Dosoftei Șcheul, ecclesiarch of the Metropolitan Cathedral of Iași - advisers for the *Christian Orthodox Calendar* online application, Priest Gheorghiiță Mihăilă, Deacon Marian Patrascu - content contributors at the *Christian Orthodox Calendar* online application, Maria Burlă, Constantin Ciofu, Tudorel-Constantin Rusu - news and editorial content, Valentin-Iulian Toc, Cezar-Constantin Cârlan - contributors at *The Network of Archdiocese of Iași parishes sites*.

The new *Doxology* web portal came with a new, improved taxonomy, opening up to a wider audience. Judging from the feedback, the philosophy was the correct one. Despite the limited human resources, it was possible to publish more quality content, mainly with the help of a network of collaborators. For example, in 2011, 5811 articles were added to *Doxologia*, compared to 2477 in the previous year.

In addition, from the very beginning, the design of *Doxologia.ro* started from several technical premises:

- the site was exclusively for internet users and it had to assign to the standards of that period's existing websites. For this reason, it was intended that *Doxologia.ro* provide the typical orientation landmarks that any internet user knows and that any quality site offered at that time;

² I used the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible.

- the site had to inspire performance, avoid both the plain and the exotic extreme, to present itself as a church in the urban landscape, which, although respecting the same architectural rigours, still retains its identity, proposing and offering another use of the space;
- the site had to be technically designed following the latest technical solutions, allowing subsequent modifications and developments;
- technically, the site had to be built in such a way as to attract as many users as possible;
- the site had to be built according to the types of content and taking into account its specificities.

6. Final remarks

In conclusion, based on qualitative interview method information, I can state that the *Doxologia.ro* web platform, launched on March 25, 2011, was designed as a “tabloid”: airy, attractive format, with an emphasis on images and impact titles. Of course, as I already mentioned, tabloid-style, in this web vision approach, meant a certain “packaging” and dimension of the online articles and it does not refer to the tabloid as editorial policy or interests. It is important to note that regarding ethical and journalistic standards, the tabloid-style platform of the Metropolis of Moldavia and Bukovina did not go beyond the surface, highlighting, during the analysed period, special care for the quality of the content. The apparent lack of order of the *Doxologia.ro* content also contributed to the impression of *consumer goods*. A closer eye might notice that *Doxologia.ro* is a web interpretation of the *orthodox iconographical vision*, in which the mix of suggestive images and adjacent text creates an impactful communication tool.

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