intersections

Research Review

Considering the (Hyper)mediation of Religion and Negotiation of Digital Boundaries within Religious Communication

February 11, 2025

For the Holy Year 2025, the Vatican announced a new mascot, Luce ("Light" in Italian)[1], a manga-like figurine of a pilgrim with blue hair and big eyes. According to Archbishop Fisichella, as written in a tweet by Catholic TV, Luce is part of a Vatican project "to live even within the pop culture so beloved by our youth." [2] The creation of this mascot, which attracted positive comments and satirical memes online from Catholics and non-Catholics alike, is an example of how contemporary religions are constantly hypermediated online, transcending the boundaries between platforms and between discussion topics. In this essay, I will delve into hypermediation as a theoretical approach that helps us understand digital religion. Focusing on contemporary Catholicism, I will argue that religion is hypermediated in ways that transcend boundaries today. Specifically, the hypermediation of religion is a perspective that highlights how boundaries across media platforms, and boundaries between religion and other socio-cultural issues like gender, become increasingly blurred. To aid in this analysis, I will offer ethnographic insights from MERGE[3], a project I am currently conducting. MERGE charts the differing ideas about gender that various Catholic groups hold alongside their similar use of digital media to create spaces of activism and discussion.



Luce, the Vatican mascot, at the Italian comic festival Lucca Comics Photographer: Claudia Gironi, Lucca, October 31 2024.

The creation of the Vatican's pop culture mascot is an example of religious hypermediation. "Hypermediation" is a term that adds the prefix "hyper" –which means "beyond" but also indicates something that is exaggerated –to the notion of mediation. Hence, this concept suggests that religious communication, like all modern communication, is no longer mediated linearly. Instead, digital media amplifies and reshapes it, creating intensified networks and narratives. Luce is an example of hypermediation because it fits a larger religious communication strategy of the Catholic Church. As noted by scholar Heidi Campbell,[4] the Vatican is dynamic in adapting to new communications, even if it does not approach technologies uncritically. This was demonstrated, for example, in Pope Francis' measured response to the development of confession apps. In his statement, he spoke about the potential dangers of social media and artificial intelligence. At the same time, he partially endorsed the apps as an aid to pastoral work without considering them as substitutes for in-person confession.[5] What makes Catholicism a relevant case study is that the Vatican, while cautious about all uses of technology, does seem to fully embrace the digital realm as a means of spreading its messages: already in the 1990s, Pope John Paul II expressed optimism about new technologies, [6] and from then the account of the Pope was established on platforms like Twitter[7] and Instagram.[8]

The rapid adaptation of religious messages to new media is far from confined to the Catholic experience. For example, the Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill has extensively used Facebook to enhance his authority[9], Japanese New Religious Movements created websites to reach their followers better[10], and some Mormons use memes as a form of digital practice to connect with their leaders[11]. However, if the Internet enhances the official

message of a leader, it can also empower groups to challenge religious authorities,[12] with some Catholics using the Internet to criticize the Pope. [13] Similarly, the Internet can be used to negotiate and challenge practices and authorities by all religious groups and institutions, as it happens with young Muslims using social media to follow "celebrity" Imams as new forms of authority,[14] or Hindu women employing the Internet to subvert gendered and religious norms.[15]

The Theory of Hypermediation: Transcending Boundaries

This heterogeneous scenario suggests that digital media are spaces where religion is not solely *mediated*, but rather *hypermediated*, as they allow for several voices to coexist. In my previous work, [16] I have argued that hypermediation can be a useful theoretical concept to understand the fast and emotional character of religion-related digital exchanges. Inspired by the notion of religious *third spaces, **[17]*** the theory of hypermediation is apt to capture online voices that use digital technologies to create innovative spaces of practice and discussion. An example of hypermediation is that of Catholic masses during Covid-19 lockdowns when people were prevented from gathering in person. In such cases, priests creatively used material objects such as candles to recreate the mass atmosphere. They then streamed the functions on social media, creating videos sometimes amplified and discussed by so-called traditional media. Facebook and Instagram served to diffuse videos not only within local communities but also to share solidarity and emotions nationwide. While this example is about practicing religion in contexts where people did not have a choice but to use the Internet, the hypermediation of physical spaces, materialities, and rituals is a striking characteristic of contemporary digital religion[18]. This idea of hypermediation is, I would argue, even more relevant given the current growth of AI and the new possibilities of creating online religious environments, which can further enhance the

religious experience[19].

> ***Hypermediation highlights two developments in the field of digital religion concerning the agency of religious groups and individuals. First, boundaries between digital platforms, and media in general, become increasingly blurred. Second, boundaries between religious topics and non-religious topics are more porous, as religion is used to discuss a variety of social and cultural issues connected, for example, to gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and politics.***

Concerning the first development: as the affordances of social media allow users to spread content in various digital venues, the boundaries across social media platforms tend to disappear. The notion of digital religion, as conceptualized by Heidi Campbell, is in itself a theoretical approach that considers online and offline actions as connected. The approach of hypermediation follows this idea by positing that Internet narratives are reproduced and spread on multiple platforms. This is exemplified by the case of transnational Catholic social movements, which I am currently exploring in my project MERGE. Catholic feminist groups that advocate for the ordination of women to the priesthood[20] use the Internet in creative ways in combination with offline actions. On the occasion of the Synod, in October 2024, a group of women protested outside the Vatican using banners where an Andy Warhol-style can of soup said “women can be priests too“[21]. This image was circulated on social media

platforms like Facebook and Instagram to raise awareness and, subsequently, the activists launched a hashtag (#CatholicWomenStrike) and video calls to promote a Catholic women's strike during Lent 2025. While only a small number of women can take part in demonstrations in Rome, this example shows how digital technologies can help people witness actions and gather online in multiple virtual venues from distant places.

Women's Ordination Campaign Poster in Rome, Women's Ordination Conference Instagram page, 11 October 2024

Concerning the second development: the Internet brings together religious and non-religious conversations in a fluid way. Scholars have noted already that digital religion needs to be concerned with gender[22]and politics[23], including identity politics[24]. This means that religion can help mobilize and organize people around shared ideas and be a frame for action within social movements[25]. This is exemplified, once again, by some Catholic movements that I study. Contrary to the previously mentioned Catholic feminist movements, other movements engage in anti-gender and anti-abortion activities. Hence, the transnational campaign group CitizenGO[26] participated in the anti-abortion March for Life in June 2024 in Rome, which ended with a banner in St. Peter's Square to the attention of Pope Francis. At the same time, CitizenGO's message is not solely religious. This is clear in the way they use their social media pages to connect with right-wing and far-right political groups, form alliances with other traditionalist movements, and discuss other issues (for example, supporting anti-migration policies and going against COVID-19 measures).

Conclusions

From the mascot Luce, a mediated image that the Vatican uses for branding, to groups that have antithetical ideas about gender and feminism despite drawing inspiration from

Catholicism, this article shows how people use religion to articulate heterogeneous actions, identities, and communities. Scholars of digital religion cannot afford to limit our knowledge of religious-related phenomena to events that happen offline, or how they appear on a single media platform. Instead, we need to see how the Internet is used in combination with physical actions and how religious groups can respond differently to the same social issues. The theory of hypermediation provides us with a useful lens for doing so.



Catholic Banners at the March for Life, Giulia Evolvi, 22nd June 2024

Some considerations need to be made concerning the blurring of boundaries that I discussed in this article. First, religious groups may use various platforms simultaneously, but they do not adapt to digital media homogenously and uncritically. As Campbell observes, religious communities negotiate whether to utilize new technologies[27]. This means that contexts and geographical locations where people do not have full access to technology should also be considered. Second, the field of digital religion has to discuss how religious groups adapt to the spreading of artificial intelligence. As AI grows, it will offer new hypermediated possibilities in terms of creating virtual realities, spreading images, and thinking about religion[28]. Simultaneously, the growth of the technology will also push religious leaders to evaluate AI in terms of authenticity and potential misinformation. Third, and connected to the previous point, the use and negotiation of digital technologies and AI can create social issues such as the spreading of post-truth politics, which can become more prominent depending on people's media literacy and technological skills[29]. While this does not only interest religious groups, religious leaders have an important stake in discussing the potential harms of technology—and even in finding frameworks to guide believers during the age of hypermediation. Therefore, this essay is an invitation. Through the lens of hypermediation, we can understand digital media as neither a threat, nor a

revolutionary tool for religions, but rather as an inevitable technology that shapes the experience of contemporary religiosity.

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Footnotes

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