



HOLY SELFIE AS THE CHANNEL OF MEDIA MEMORY IN THE DIGITAL WORLD

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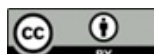
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Abstract

Selfie as a special genre of digital photography performs a variety of functions, giving users the possibility to refer themselves to places, persons and events, thus personifying one's self-presentation and expressing the author's attitude to the world and their own experiences. Selfie is actively used in the representation of religious life, first of all, documenting the connection of the authors to sacred places, objects, persons and events, preserving the memory of significant moments in the life of an individual and making it available to the public. The memorial function of photography in the holy selfie format merges with its communicative function, changing the motivation of religious practice, redirecting it from the acquisition of religious experience to its sharing, empathy and participation, i.e. socializing religious experience. By analysing likes and reposts of selfie content, one can create strategies for the union of virtual religious communities around the offline experience of their members. In this article we will try to identify the differences in the ways of organizing the semantic space of holy selfie, practiced by the followers of Catholicism and Orthodoxy. Holy selfie will be studied as a new media memory channel to which users resort in order to correlate the practices of constructing personal and group memory for the reproduction of religious context by banal religion. Our work is based on the content analysis of selfie photos posted on Instagram.

Keywords

digital religion; selfie; media memory; mediatization of religion; memory studies; commemoration; Orthodoxy; Catholicism; canon; channel



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HOLY SELFIE КАК КАНАЛ МЕДИАПАМЯТИ В ЦИФРОВОМ МИРЕ

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Аннотация

Селфи как особый жанр цифровой фотографии выполняет самые разнообразные функции, позволяя пользователям документировать причастность к местам, персонам и событиям, ярче персонифицировать самопрезентацию, выражать свою отношение к окружающему и миру и собственным переживаниям. Активно применяется он в репрезентации религиозной жизни, в первую очередь, документальной фиксации причастности их авторов к сакральным местам, предметам, персонам и событиям, сохраняя память о знаковых моментах в жизни индивида и делая ее доступной для широкой общественности. Мемориальная функция фотографии в формате Holy Selfie сливается с коммуникативной функцией, меняя мотивацию религиозной практики, перенаправляя ее с обретения и переживания религиозного опыта к его разделению, сопереживанию и сопричастности, т.е. социализируя религиозный опыт. По лайкам и репостам селфи-контента можно воссоздать стратегии консолидации религиозных виртуальных сообществ вокруг офлайн-опыта их членов. В рамках данной статьи мы попытаемся выявить различия в способах организации смыслового пространства Holy Selfie, практикуемых последователями католицизма и православия, на основе контент-анализа фотографий данного типа, размещенных в социальной сети Instagram.

Ключевые слова

цифровая религия; селфи; медиапамять; медиатизация религии; исследования памяти; коммеморация; православие; католицизм; канон; канал



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INTRODUCTION

The study of the social visual representation of religious experience in the digital environment is complicated by the fact that it is a relatively new socio-cultural phenomenon. On the one hand, the technologies that gave rise to it have appeared quite recently. On the other hand, the endogenous logic of the functioning of religious institutions plays the role of an inertial, restraining force in relation to the implementation of new media technologies in religious practices, as well as to the long-term controversy over the ethical aspects of their use and the search for compromise solutions. Nevertheless, the rootedness of the media in daily life is inevitably reflected in religious life. Media act as a tool for the users to build their own identity, including it in ideological, religious and retrospective components. Most religious organizations fit their institutionalization into the national context, while states, building their confessional policy, take into account the contribution of specific confessions to state-building. The formation of religious identity involves complex problems of self-determination in the relations between the individual and the state, the individual and the denomination, and the denomination and the state. They are also influenced by the patterns of family, confession and state history. These complex processes are taking on a digital form in the modern world, adapting to the formats and genres of social media, memes, blogs, posts, user photos, becoming a manifestation of religious experience and commemoration at the same time.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

Within the framework of this study, selfies will be considered as a special channel of media memory, the use of which gives users the opportunity to design their own identity in the religious sphere, embedding their content in multi-level memory practices.

METHODOLOGY

The theoretical basis of the study is the concept of memory studies, the theory of mediation and mediatization of religion. The authors used communication approach, network approach and a media version of content analysis adapted to explore the visual content of social networks.

MEDIA, RELIGION AND EXPLANATORY THEORIES

The complexity of the relationship between religion and media is a serious methodological challenge for researchers of religion. In recent years, the efforts of researchers have been concentrated around the theories of



mediatization and mediation, which serve as the development and, at the same time, criticism of the concept of secularization (Berger, 2019). The disenchantment of the world has had a negative impact on the classical institutional forms of religion, but it cannot neutralize its ontological existential essence. The theories of mediatization reveal, basically, the adaptation of religious institutions to new social reality, demonstrating the stability and viability of religion under any social conditions. Organized religion, indeed, is causing less interest nowadays, but this does not mean a decrease in individualized forms of religious belief, which form the basis of the media presence of religion in the digital environment. In this article, we will adhere to the definition of religion as “a set of symbolic forms that relate a person to the final conditions of his existence” (Bellah, 1972) understanding all its vulnerable aspects and leaving opportunities for their analysis in other works. For the purpose of media analysis, a clear definition of the phenomenon of religion and religiosity is secondary to the very act of manifestation and declaration of religious experience, since the vagueness of meaning when correctly marked within the cultural code does not prevent the transmission of a religious message through the media channel. However, the general logic of communication systems is sensitive to institutional norms, and in this regard, the theory of mediatization, integrating social constructivist and institutional traditions, shows the transformation of institutional religious norms under the influence of background everyday knowledge about religion, transmitted by specific media channels (Hepp, 2013).

The importance of the concept of mediatization for our work is connected with the fact that it is designed to bridge the epistemological gap between the two institutional worlds, the world of religion and the world of media. Stuart Hoover tries to reject the opposition of religion and the media as two coherent, transistor, and unchanging forms that exist autonomously and act potentially independently of each other, in favor of the understanding their kinship, similarity and unity in the realization of their own goals and functions in modern societies, their ability to act as resources for the narrative construction of active social actors (Hoover, 2006).

The concept of mediatization was formed as an attempt to describe the growth of media influence in politics or in late modern society as a whole, and as such it goes back to the theorists of postmodernism, first of all, to the concept of simulacra by J. Baudrillard and the society of the spectacle by G. Deborah, describing the media symbolic mediation of all structures of the social order. As applied to religion, it means the symbolic representation of religious practices in the media sphere. Stig Hjarvard postulates that mediatization presupposes the decline of institutionalized religious power in the process of establishing media dominance with the constant presence, trans-



formation and significance of religious fantasies in secular societies (Hjarvard, 2012). He defines mediatization itself as a new social and cultural condition in which the media cease to serve other social institutions (religion, science, cultural institutions, political parties and movements) and begin to play a different role in culture and society, providing public representation (Hjarvard, 2012). In this sense, the media are autonomous in relation to other institutions, which does not prevent them from being included in institutional contexts, mediating inter-institutional interactions and functioning as channels, languages and environments.

Mediatization is described by S. Hjarvard on the basis of the central provisions of Lynch's structural analysis: media are secular or have weak confessional orientation; religious organisations are institutionalized; the population has little contact with religious institutions, becoming involved in religious issues via media narratives; society, organizations and personality are secular to a high degree (Lynch, 2011). This structural arrangement leads to the fact that religious organizations are poorly able to control their public representation, the religious media created by them serve the internal processes of self-identity formation, and the media replicate mainly “banal religion” – culturally recognizable religious content without propaganda, used for entertaining intertextual trans-genre semiotic games (reality shows, TV sermons, personal stories, etc.), fueling the interest of the audience.

The idea of mediatization as a structural condition of religious practice is expanded by Andreas Hepp, who tries to combine social-cognitive and institutional aspects of transmediality in the analysis of modern religious life (Hepp, 2013). He connects the transmedial approach to mediatization with the identification of communicative patterns on which individuals build their mediatized worlds. Mediatization for him is a concept used to critically analyze the (long-term) relationship between changing media and communication, on the one hand, and changing culture and society, on the other; the changes themselves can be considered both qualitatively and quantitatively. Using the concept of mediatized worlds (small life or social worlds, articulated by media) that exist as an extraterritorial network, he opens religious communication for empirical analysis as a specific communicative pattern in which communicative actions which differently articulated by different media are intertwined.

Mia Lövheim interprets mediatization as the process of spreading a weak banal religion through the media and uses this concept to show not the damage caused by secularization to institutional religion, but to discover new forms of religious existence associated with both personal significance and the public presence of religion under modern media conditions (Lövheim, 2011). Here, in our opinion, exist broad prospects for identifying the forms of



integration of new digital technologies and religious traditions. In this regard, we consider the following idea of Levheim extremely important: the use of the media by religious persons and institutions to mediate the transcendent and organize social relations in such a way that they meet the conditions of life in modern society is not equivalent to the loss of core values by religion. The use of media is a holistic, continuous way of expressing and professing religion.

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE, MEMORY OF THE PAST AND MEDIA MEMORY

The religious experience of the individual is directly related to their individual memory of the past. Religion forms ideas about the past on a par with such agents of socialization as the family, the school, and the state, since the memory of the religious past of communities is an integral part of everyday religious practice. The history of religion presented in texts, architectural buildings or significant places of remembrance attracts pilgrims seeking to experience the same religious state that others have experienced before them. The institutionalization of religious places of memory takes place by giving them the status of being significant for the history of religion and the formation of the identity of the religious community. These places are associated with legends and stories, transmitted not only in the form of storytelling, but also having a canonical character.

In traditional society ancestral memory served as the instrument of personal identification. It also incorporated social norms of behavior regulation: family traditions, religion, rituals, etiquette, and folklore. They formed the basis of the group memory transmitted via the culture of a community. Thus, group cultural memory formed the basis of a person's intellectual experience and constituted their individual memory. The transition from the traditional society to the industrial one, and then to the post-industrial and information society was marked by the rupture of ancestral ties, and, therefore, the loss of ancestral memory, which marked the emergence of historical memory, storing knowledge not only about the past of individuals and their families, but about the past of peoples, states and religious communities.

At the same time, the need for personal identification and bond with a particular community have remained the most important factors in the existence of the individual, forcing them to turn to the group cultural memory for images of the past, which could replace the lost ancestral memory. The history of religion as an element of group memory thus becomes part of the structure of individual historical memory, supported by the direct religious experience of a person, accompanied by becoming familiar with material confessional values, via holy selfi among other things.



The mediatization of society has led to the new way of the storage, transformation and transmission of information, which has changed the nature of historical memory and the practice of oblivion. The media and social media are becoming no less important factors in creating a new view of the past than professional academic historians. Historical memory does not simply use media channels to transmit the image of the past, it makes them an integral part of the system of representation of history, so the theory of mediatization needs a digital “turn”, allowing new media to give a new impetus to religious life.

The above said suggests the emergence of media memory, which can be understood as a digital system of storage, transformation, production and dissemination of information about the past, forming the historical memory of individuals and communities. Media memory can be considered as a virtual social mechanism of remembering and forgetting, it provides different forms of representation of history in the space of everyday life, expands the practice of presenting the past and commemoration, as well as increases the number of people creating and consuming memorial content.

Media memory subjects historical knowledge to a certain selection, including relevant information about the past in the agenda, and obviating things that have no public need. Historical knowledge becomes segmented between different elements of the media sphere, which can be seen in the variety of historical Internet resources aimed at different target audiences.

Media memory is characterised by the dominance of personal and family memory, with representations of the past based on personal emotional experiences taken for granted. Biographical testimonies and memoirs arouse the greatest interest of modern people, who have the opportunity to tell their stories on social media. For a religious person, the stories that reflect his or her religious affiliation are significant.

Media memory is democratic. It is created on the basis of free expression of thoughts and feelings of people by available language means. User photographs and documentary evidence play an equally important role in shaping perceptions of the past, along with subjective perceptions of reality and evaluative statements. Historical information produced and distributed by individuals serves their ideological and personal needs, on the basis of which a person forms their own identity and worldview. Media memory acts as the historical dimension of post-truth, when personal history and personal experience of reality replace objective data. Holy selfies act as a tool to confirm the historical objectivity of the religious experience of community and to manifest relation to religious places of memory.



HOLY SELFIE AS THE CHANNEL OF RELIGIOUS MEDIA MEMORY

Technologically, a selfie can be described as a sociocultural practice of creating images of oneself using digital technology, filtering these images and posting them on social media. This technological basis forms the social and communicative innovativeness of selfies, which involves the living dynamic environment and the flow of group consciousness in real time (Tifentale, 2015).

The technological and social-communicative peculiarities of the selfie determine its visual canon. Firstly, it includes the way to make an image: a selfie is always a photo, it can't be a drawing, animation or video. Secondly, the canon involves a set of pictorial conventions by which a photo is identified as a selfie regardless of whether it is accompanied by a hashtag. Such conventions include the bodies of people and their gestures. The photographing subject is always in the frame:

“group selfies are particularly striking examples of this transformation, where the photographer is usually at the forefront of the group of faces and bodies, visibly participating in the process of composing the picture as it is received” (Frosh, 2015).

Since the selfie is taken at arm's length of the subject, at least one hand must be present in the frame.

However, the outstretched hand (or a selfie stick) does not just mark the photographer, it invites the viewer with a phatic gesture of inclusive participation, co-existence and sharing the moment. Therefore, P. Frosh characterizes the selfie pose as a deictic movement of the body, which draws attention to the context of viewing the image and to the activity of the viewer, provoking reciprocal gestures (Frosh, 2015). Reciprocal gestures can be selfie-replicas, likes and reposts. Most often, a selfie includes the photographer's face, but it can also focus on other parts of the body, such as legs, #footfie (Eckel et al., 2018). Besides the photographer, selfies can include other people (#relife and #groufie) and pets (#felfie). Typical selfie situations have led to subgenres (#liftlook, #duckface, #fitnessselfie, #bathselfie, #buttsselfie, #bifie, #WakeUpSelfie, #UgliesSelfie, # AfterSexSelfie, #extremeselfie, etc.).

THE CASES OF SELFIE EVALUATION BY RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

An important aspect of the popularity of selfies among believers is the attitude of priests to the phenomenon of selfie. For the Roman Catholic Church, the issue of selfies has been relevant for a long time. The



phenomenon of #Papselfie demonstrates positive attitude of both the Pontiff and the Catholic clergy to selfies with the head of the Church. This practice is an important way of shaping modern image of the Catholic Church in the media space, as well as a tool for its missionary and catechetical activities on the Internet. The first public selfie with Pope Francis was taken by Italian teenagers in 2013.

In comparison, the first selfie with Patriarch Kirill, posted on his official page on VK, was made only two years later in 2015. It is also worth noting that the selfie of the head of the Church was not available on the network. The Patriarch and the winners of the competition “Orthodox initiative” organised by the Simbirsk metropolis were photographed in the process of taking a selfie. Russian Instagram at the time of the study has more than 11,5 thousand photos with #patriarchkirill, among which there are no selfies taken directly with or against the background of the primate of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Mass media contain the statements of priests about the attitude of the church to selfies. In 2018, at a meeting with the priests and lay leaders of the Diocese of Rome in the United States, Pope Francis noted that he had realized the negative social implications of technology a few days earlier when he was greeting teens participating in a program of the international network of “Scholas Occurrentes.”

“They were all there waiting for me,” he said. “When I arrived, they made noise, as young people do. I went to greet them and only a few gave their hand. The majority were with their cellphones (saying), ‘photo, photo, photo. Selfie!’”

“I saw that this is their reality, that is the real world, not human contact. And this is serious. They are ‘virtualized’ youths,” the Pope said.

“The world of virtual communication is a good thing, but when it becomes alienating, it makes you forget to shake hands.” (Esteves, 2018).

The official position of the Russian Orthodox Church regarding selfies of laity taken during service in churches has been repeatedly expressed in the media by priests. In 2017, RIA-Novosti published the opinion of the priests and Professor of the Moscow Theological Academy and Seminary Archpriest Maxim Kozlov, who noted that “during the service it is necessary to turn off mobile phones. If someone uses them to take a selfie during worship, then it is, of course, wrong. It is desirable to refrain from this naive, though understandable, vanity” (the ROC called on parishioners..., 2017). In the same 2017 Archpriest and Associate Professor of the Moscow Theological Academy Pavel Velikanov urged women not to take selfies during baptismal bathing:



"I would like to urge any users of social networks to remember that if we take responsibility for any idle word, then even more so we will take responsibility for the wrong, embarrassing and tempting images that we publish on social networks" (the ROC called on women..., 2017) .

It should be noted that the Patriarch did not speak directly about the attitude to the culture of selfies among Orthodox users of social networks.

At the same time, priests use social media to promote the teachings of the Church and to attract parishioners. This is the case of the missionary work of David Peters from the USA, Texas, and hieromonk Alexander Mitrofanov from Novosibirsk, who use the application "TikTok" to attract young people to the Church. Selfies for these missionaries are not just a tool to communicate with young people in a familiar language, but also a way to present their religious experience associated with certain places of memory.

VISUAL ANALYSIS OF HOLY SELFIE

The analysis of selfie images during the study was carried out according to the following parameters: composition, including the foreground and background of the photograph, the number of photographs and their gender, as well as the volume that the photographer's face occupies in the photograph; facial expressions / faces in the photograph, postures, gestures; places where selfies were taken; filters, templates, decor used by users when processing photos.

It should be noted that both Catholic and Orthodox Instagram users, despite the negative opinions of the clergy regarding selfie culture, consider selfie practice to be quite acceptable, and in some cases a necessary aspect of their spiritual life. The selfies of Catholic users are characterized by a free composition, showing different angles and shooting points. Often in selfies of Catholic users, you can note the filling of the frame with the subject of the shooting, that is, the face or faces of the photographs. This is usually due to the user's desire to focus on the person with whom the selfie is being taken (Pope or priest) or is due to purely technical features of creating a selfie (the inability to shoot from a long distance). Posts tagged with #holyselfie are more likely to be from Catholic men, although statistically women are more likely to post selfies. The volume of a face or faces in most cases occupies more than 2/3 of the photo, which indicates the importance for Catholic users of their own person and the emphasis on their own religious experiences, and not on the situation or place in which they are.

For Orthodox users, a more ascetic compositional structure of a selfie is characteristic. In photographs, there is a tendency to maintain a linear perspective. Shooting is carried out from the front, there is no variety in terms



of shooting angles. Users try to focus on the background, thereby demonstrating the topos of creating a selfie. The poses in photos are static, and the selfie itself always has a story center. The image in most cases is laconic and minimalist, there is no attention to detail, which indicates the desire of users to concentrate on the environment, to demonstrate the importance of the sacred space in which they are or the status of the clergyman with which they are photographed, i.e. to show their involvement in something something significant. The volume of faces in the photo takes no more than 1/3 of the selfie.

Catholic selfies are characterized by a variety of religious themes used in photography. They can be divided into several types: photographs with priests and against the background of Catholic churches prevail among them. For Orthodox users, selfies taken in places of pilgrimage trips, as well as visits to temples, are more significant. Catholic selfies are distinguished by a variety of facial expressions captured on them (smiles, for example), while Orthodox selfies are serious. Basically, the number of people in Orthodox selfies is no more than 2 people, and the man is often in the foreground. Catholics upload both collective and individual selfies to the network, and the number of people in the frame significantly exceeds 2. Orthodox users are much less likely than Catholics to use filters or templates, as well as special programs for processing photographs.

CONCLUSIONS

Media memory channels are fast and user-friendly, they easily adapt to any specific social context. The holy selfie case demonstrates the expansion of contemporary practices of individual commemoration, focused on linking personal experiences and places of memory, into Orthodox social contexts. The cautious and even hostile attitude of religious institutions to new digital technologies is explained not so much by the confrontation between the world of religion and the world of technology and science, as by the confrontation between the world of religion and consumer society, with its culture of using digital gadgets. The spread of digital forms of religious media memory is initiated by religiously oriented users, it has the direction of upward flows coming from the "earth". Official positions of confessions soften as new technologies take root in everyday life, but the speed of this change depends largely on the confessional social doctrine, flexibility of missionary policy and willingness to open up to the world. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century the Vatican improved the ways of communication with the world, while the Russian Orthodox Church received a privileged position in the post-Soviet period, which weakened its willingness to compete in the struggle for minds. Therefore, Orthodoxy demonstrates a more modest



pace of legitimization of digital media memory, giving in to Catholicism. In general, religious people, regardless of religious affiliation, are incorporated into the mass digital culture, one of the elements of which is the selfie. Holy religious-themed selfies connect individual spiritual experience with the material objects of religion, making it part of digital collective memory formed by media. Thus, a holy selfie is the most important channel of media memory, forming ideas about the past, along with digital archives and digital content on historical topics.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Denis S. Artamonov – author of the theory of media memory and the related section of the article; Sofia V. Tikhonova – author of the idea of the article, developed the research program, wrote the description of the theory of selfies; Elena N. Medvedeva – conducted the study, described its results; Marina L. Volovikova – participated in research and wrote both theoretical and practical parts of the article, translated it into English.

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