



This work is made available under the terms of the  
Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY- 4.0)

## **Monasteries in the Online Environment. How the Internet Changes the Concept of Monastery**

**Elena-Adriana Filipescu**, PhD Student, University of Bucharest, FJSC, Doctoral  
School in Communication Sciences, E-mail: elena\_adriana72@yahoo.com

***Abstract.*** The early studies concerning library users were focused on identifying general patterns of research and retrieval of information. Along the years, the studies have shifted towards measuring the degree of satisfaction with library services. The present study is taking into consideration both approaches and investigates aspects related to the reasons for frequenting the library. In February 2018, on the premises of “Carol I” Central University Library of Bucharest, we have conducted 13 semi-structured interviews with the new users of the library. Our main findings are the following: the main reason for coming to the library is studying for or writing a paper, users have a rather stereotypical representation of the library and the users regard the library as a place with a potential for interaction with fellow students.

***Keywords:*** monastery, internet, online environment, community

### **The changing role of the monastery**

In the explanatory dictionary of the Romanian language, the monastery is defined as a “religious settlement in which monks or nuns live, according to austere and isolated rules of life” (Academia Română, 2009). Wishart (2004) explains the etymology of the term “monastery”, which “comes from the same source as the term monk and is commonly applied to a building used exclusively by monks.”

The monk is the religious person who does not appear only in Christianity: any great religion from ancient and modern times was also expressed through a monastic form of life. The origin of the monastic institution is lost in antiquity, but some authors consider that India was its birthplace. In the sacred writings dated to 2400 BC, there are numerous legends about holy monks and ascetic rules (Wishart, 2004).

Among the defining characteristics of the monasteries are asceticism and isolation from the world. This last element has been questioned through the use of the Internet by the monasteries and, in particular, of social networks, where new social connections can be created. Over time, the monasteries hosted travellers and people in need of spiritual guidance, maintained correspondence networks through letters and sent members on various missions. But the monastery's current exposure is unprecedented, as is the desire to achieve strategic goals (such as attracting new members, donations and visitors) through digital technologies in general and in especially through the world wide web and social networks.

Tanasyuk and Avgerou (2009) researched the use of information and communication technologies among the Athos Mountain community of monks. The results of the study indicate heterogeneous opinions regarding these technologies and significant differences from one monastery to another. One of the most widely used monasteries on the Internet is Vatopedi, where only 8-10 of the 150 monks use the internet, and the proportion of young people and new followers is higher than in other monasteries. Also, the study reveals that all the monasteries on Mount Athos have email addresses, which they do not make public. The authors concluded that the monasteries on Mount Athos use information and communication technologies for three main purposes: for conducting business and lucrative activities, for communication and for cultural preservation, by digitizing cultural heritage (Tanasyuk and Avgerou, 2009).

### **Use of the Internet by monasteries: reasons and impact**

For some Roman-Catholic monasteries, the possibilities offered by the Internet have become a solution to the problem of the steep decrease in the number of monks. This is also the case of the Saint Claire Monastery in Oristano, with 10 nuns, most of whom are of old age, lacking the ability to meet all the requirements of the monastery life, such as 8 prayer sessions per day, gardening, sewing or communicating with visitors. That's why one of the younger sisters at Saint Claire Monastery created a site and social media page on Facebook (Morrill, 2017). Thus, not only are efforts being made to identify and attract new members, essential for the continuity of the monastery, but visitors and believers are also attracted to the monastery.

As Morrill (2017) observed, in the Middle Ages people came to interact with monasteries through physical proximity and personal visits, whether they were just listening to Mass outside the walls. There were also written communication

networks through letters. At present, however, these forms of interaction with the monasteries have disappeared or decreased considerably in intensity. Instead, the Internet has become the environment in which monasteries can reach their goals in relation to the outside world.

Another relevant case for illustrating the changing role of monasteries is that of an Episcopal monastery on Harvard Square, called “The Society of Saint John the Evangelist.” This monastery was in danger of dissolution in the 2000s, in the context of the need for expensive repairs to buildings (about \$13 million) and of financial losses of its own publishing house. The solution consisted of forming a team consisting of two employees, three trainees and a team of volunteers responsible for creating and distributing spiritual content in the online environment. The monastery has a newsletter program called “Brother, give us a word”, sending daily emails to subscribers, administering a religious calendar that includes original video content, with monks and, last but not least, producing workbooks for event participants. Following these online efforts, the monastery was able to obtain all the necessary funds for the repair of the building, which was completed. The success of the online strategy can also be measured by the high number of subscribers to the newsletter, which counted 25,000 in 2016 (MacDonald, 2016).

The monks in this society are aware of the impact that digital technologies could have on their lifestyle, so they are careful to maintain a balance and impose limits. One of them explains about the internet and technology that „we should not disturb the life of prayer, community living and inviting our guests to share our lives. So we don't think about the website every day, which is good” (MacDonald, 2016). Also, part of the success of this church's online program is the online access to content made by people who do not use the Internet themselves, and who have a distinct spiritual perspective, reinforced by asceticism and isolation from society.

At the same time, the members of the Langwaden monastery in the North Rhine-Westphalia use the Internet not only to communicate with the outside world, but also to streamline tasks within the monastery. The monk Aelred, responsible for both the relations with the press and the guest house of the monastery, explained the following about the use of the Internet in the monastery: „It is quite difficult to travel for every trifle until the administrator of the building or to the kitchen. By email everything goes much faster. The disadvantage is that we rarely see each other, so contacts with our peers are getting rarer.” (Winther and Stefan, 2009).

Last but not least, some monasteries use the Internet to sell their own products more efficiently. One such monastery is the Belgian abbey of Saint Sixtus, which

sells craft beer in a limited series since 1878. One of the problems they faced was customers trying to circumvent the maximum limit of two crates of beer, some purchasing large quantities for selling at a larger price, which the monks forbid. Developing its own website, the Belgian abbey has largely solved this problem using an online reservation system (Bădescu, 2019).

### **Monasteries in Romania in the online environment**

Some of the monasteries in Romania have an important tourism element, being introduced in both secular tourist circuits and in religious pilgrimages. On the Internet, they aim to attract tourists further, their flow being the one that feeds much of the monastic activity.

One such case is the Putna Monastery, which can be accessed on the website [www.putna.ro](http://www.putna.ro), but also on accounts created on social networks: YouTube and Facebook. On Facebook, Putna Monastery has accumulated an impressive number of followers (190,948) and reviews (1,902), which resulted in an almost perfect score, of 4.9 out of a maximum of 5 points (Putna Monastery, 2019a). On YouTube, a platform on which the Putna Monastery has an account since 2010, the monastery has accumulated 13,000 subscribers and 2,347,969 views on uploaded video content (Putna Monastery, 2019b). These social media indicators are superior to most churches and cathedrals in Romania, making Putna Monastery more connected and more popular online than many other Orthodox places of worship in the country. On the official site, the monastery offers in the contact section the following elements: a map of the area with the Putna Monastery marked, address, telephone numbers, email addresses, bank accounts, accommodation possibilities, the train route between Suceava - Putna and a contact form.

### **Conclusions**

For monasteries, the Internet has brought new possibilities and solutions to the problems faced by the communities of monks and nuns. From the few national and international cases presented, we have extracted several ways in which monasteries use the Internet: to attract new monks and followers, to spread teachings, to attract essential donations for maintaining the monastic life and community, to sell handmade products, to communicate internally and to attract tourists or visitors.

However, in this context, the role of monasteries in society is changing, as well as the way they relate to it. Looking at the institutional level, one can see a difference between the approach of monasteries over time. In the past, isolation from society meant that most interactions would occur when believers came to monasteries, for spiritual shelter or guidance. Currently, monasteries come to people in the online environment, they are the ones who initiate interactions, offering spiritual guidance and original content.

However, the monastic experience was not changed in depth, due to the approach of many monasteries. Even the most active ones on the Internet do not involve the entire community of monks. In most cases, the responsibility for online communication activities was given to a person or a team, thus restricting the degree to which the ordinary monk interacts with the secular world. Despite the novelty presented by the Internet, there is also a continuity of roles. Within the monasteries, there were both monks who avoided social interactions as much as those who had the responsibilities of communicating with the guests hosted by the monastery or their spiritual guidance. Currently, these roles have not fundamentally changed, but have only been modernized, including digital technology, the internet and the *world wide web* in traditional tasks of monks. What is, however, unprecedented is the potential for global exposure of monks' ideas and messages, all in real time. As more monasteries connect with the believers and the secular world through the Internet, it will be necessary to develop a set of rules, whether it is individual, made by each monastery, or jointly, created centrally for each cult or religion.

## References

- Academia Română (2009). *Dicționar explicativ al limbii române*. (Ediția a II-a revizuită și adăugită). București: Univers Enciclopedic Gold.
- Bădescu, F. (2019). Călugării de la o mănăstire belgiană vor folosi internetul pentru a vinde un sortiment celebru de bere. *Agerpres*. Retrieved from <https://www.agerpres.ro/zigzag/2019/06/14/calugarii-de-la-o-manastire-belgiana-vor-folosi-internetul-pentru-a-vinde-un-sortiment-celebru-de-bere--326736>
- Mănăstirea Putna (2019). Mănăstirea Putna, *Facebook*. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/SfantaManastirePutna/>
- MacDonald, J. (2016). Ancient practices meet new technology when Episcopal monks share wisdom online, *Faith & Leadership*. Retrieved from <https://faithandleadership.com/ancient-practices-meet-new-technology-when-episcopal-monks-share-wisdom-online>

- Morrill, B. (2017). Before the digital age, how religious groups increased the numbers in their order, *The Conversation*. Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/before-the-digital-age-how-religious-groups-increased-the-numbers-in-their-order-78734>
- Tanasyuk, P.& Avgerou, Ch. (2009). ICT and religious tradition: the case of Mount Athos. In IFIP WG9.4 Conference. Retrieved from [http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/35560/1/ICT\\_and\\_religious\\_tradition\\_\(LSERO\).pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/35560/1/ICT_and_religious_tradition_(LSERO).pdf)
- Winther, L. & Ștefan, C. (2009). Mănăstirea Langwaden - călugări online. *DW*. Retrieved from <https://www.dw.com/ro/m%C3%A2n%C4%83stirea-langwaden-c%C4%83lug%C4%83ri-online/a-4272011>
- Wishart, A.W. (2004). *A Short History of Monks and Monasteries*. Retrieved from <http://www.dominipublico.gov.br/download/texto/gu013206.pdf>