MEDIATED EASTER: CONSTRUCTING RELIGIOUS RITUALS IN A LOCKDOWN

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic led to major lockdowns over the world in 2020. This situation severely limited the possibility of several social activities, including religious gatherings. In Russia, the peak of the pandemic coincided with the central period in the Orthodox calendar – the last week of Lent and Easter. As the Patriarch blessed stay-at-home politics, churches were officially closed for everybody but the clergy, and live streams of services on social media were organized; believers had to adapt swiftly to a new mode of copresence in church by participating in services online. To do this, they had to make a choice from the places from which the live stream was organized, transform the space of their homes to accommodate sacrality of the event, rethink the locality of their own body in being instantly at home and "in church", and manage communication with the priest, fellow parishioners, and family members during Easter night. This involved subtle mechanisms of balancing authority within the network of sacred objects, gadgets, and people. Based on digital ethnography (including participant observation online) and 40 in-depth interviews, the paper investigates how believers constructed and reflected the space of the Easter service in their homes, and presents three key strategies: synchronization, spacing, and appellation to experience.

Keywords: copresence, COVID-19, Easter, kinesthetics, media, mediatization, religion, ritual, sacred space, service

INTRODUCTION

I switched the TV on. Dressed up, complete with my headscarf. My daughters were with me. My husband, although he is not a believer, was also with us. Then after the church service, we sang, "Christ is risen" with my older daughter. Easter came to our house.[1]

This text was posted on Instagram by a woman from Russia on April 20, 2020, the day after the Orthodox Easter celebration during COVID-19 lockdown, when many Orthodox believers faced the reality of celebrating the main Christian feast away from their parishes, watching the night service online or on television.

The lockdown in most cities of Russia in the spring of 2020 was a serious challenge for the church. The prohibition to attend church services during Lent and especially Easter was met with severe criticism, and believers hoped that at least they would be allowed to attend the Easter service. However, on April 15, the lockdown regime was strengthened, and only certain groups of professionals were allowed to travel around the city, the clergy among them. Unprecedentedly, the night Easter service was to be carried out in empty churches, with only members of the clergy and people working there being allowed to allowed to go inside. The rest of believers had to contend with synchronous broadcasts of church services, which used to be provided from a few churches, cathedrals or monasteries even before the COVID-19 pandemic (mostly on Russian Orthodox TV channels) but became a more popular digital product in the spring of 2020, several weeks before Easter, during Lent and the Passion Week. Depending on the resources of particular parishes, these could be professional TV broadcasts or live streams on social media performed from someone's smartphone placed on a tripod in front of the altar. By mid-April, a significant part of believers found themselves in a situation of mediatized participation in religious rituals.

The word "participation" seems paradoxical in this context. However, this is precisely the word used by both the clergy and believers who were physically separated during the lockdown. As the former performed the service in empty churches and the latter watched the ritual in their homes, both framed this situation as participation and cooperation. In this paper, I will focus on the practices which made the "augmented reality" (Berger 2020) of the distributed church service possible. The "COVID Easter" is not just a way to look at ritual practices of a particular Christian denomination, but rather a convenient case to analyze how copresence and engagement are constructed in a mediatized environment.

Religious practices in digital spaces have been studied for decades. Starting from Christopher Helland's seminal work (2000), research in this field has focused on two types of integrating the digital into religion (and vice versa): "religion online" (online resources with information on religion) and "online religion" (practices of performing religion online). Helland examined primarily the second one, studying online religious practices through the lens of "lived religion" approach (Helland 2005), with a focus on non-institutional web platforms where they are performed. For him, online religion is constituted horizontally through non-hierarchical engagement of believers, and to a certain extent it is

an opposition to official churches, which use the Internet primarily to spread information and perform missionary work rather than rituals online.

The first researches into online religious performances were almost exclusively based on the material of English-speaking protestant Christian communities or New Age / neo-pagan groups. However, soon the researchers noticed that online religion could also be practiced within the more traditional religious denomination. The works by Heidi Campbell published since the early 2000s (Campbell 2004, 2005a, 2005b, etc.) discuss the notion of networked religion based on an online community of people who construct their identity on the grounds of participating in religious practices developed in multisite spaces, online and offline at the same time. Along with these studies, researchers discuss traditional religious offline practices as ways of constructing virtual realities. "Virtual" in this sense is not a synonym of "offline", but rather an opposite to everyday experience. Religious practices are seen as non-temporal or non-historical (e.g., the Eucharist is not a re-enactment of Christ's sacrifice or commemorative practice, but takes place here-and-now each time it is performed), and involve immaterial subjects (e.g., there is a common belief in Orthodox Christianity that angels are present at the liturgy unseen). For example, Stephen O'Leary suggests considering Catholic Mass as a mechanism of producing virtual reality, "a reality supported by a panoply of sensory impressions but created wholly through language and symbolism" (O'Leary 1996: 800). If we look at the online practices from this perspective – as situations in which objects are created with the help of a certain symbolic code – they cease to be something principally new and become an organic part of religious tradition.

Following Henry Jenkins's influential concept of participatory culture, researchers define online religion as a set of practices performed by a community for the same community. For over a decade, online religion was perceived as a product of purely horizontal interaction inside communities, putting a rigid border between vernacular online practices with their focus on belonging and the hierarchical models of "official" churches, "participatory religion" with active parishioners and "vicar religion" in which believers are focused and dependent on the clergy rather than being active and focused on the community, follow the prescribed ritual rather than construct it (Davie 2007; Lundby 2011).

Putting this position to a question, I will discuss how individual practices merge and interact with officially sanctioned ones in the mediatized ritual to form a common sacral space within the context of a traditionally "vicar" Christian denomination – Russian Orthodox Church. It will be essential to define how people construct their communication, their copresence and participation in a situation of a distanced church service. I will rely here on John Urry's concept of copresence in virtual practices: both distanced and near, present and

elusive, weird and strange (Urry 2002: 255). To define the notion of space, I will follow Doreen Massey who sees it as a product of relations between people and objects, always in the process of construction (Massey 2005).

In this paper I will show how, in the situation of forced isolation, people construct their copresence and participation in the ritual, bridging physical and virtual spaces with discursive and bodily practices and forming translocal social entanglements in the "embodied space" (Low 2003: 10), where experience and consciousness assume material form, with the help of technology. In this sense virtual and physical are not opposites: "If actors are in presence of objects and living beings to which they can take a position, which they can manipulate and which they synthesize through perception, feelings and thoughts, a space is constituted for them" (Berger 2020: 606).

TALKING RELIGION ON ZOOM: RESEARCH DURING LOCKDOWN

This research was initiated accidentally and as an autoethnography. Being an Orthodox Christian, I was involved in online religious practices during COVID-19 lockdown in spring 2020 and started a field diary with descriptions of live streams, my own practices and feelings – and also carried out a social media listening project on the topic.

Then a series of semi-structured interviews were undertaken. Three weeks after Orthodox Easter, I published a post on Facebook aimed at recruiting research participants and got a surprisingly high number of replies coming both from my immediate contacts and from reposts made by my friends. The timing of recruitment turned out to be very productive: the remembrance of Easter online was still relatively fresh, but people had already had a chance to participate in a few more online services and reflect on their experience. The churches were still closed for lockdown, so the emotions were still very intense, and people were eager to share their feelings and thoughts. Many of the research participants felt quite isolated – both due to lockdown and inability to find a person within an immediate social circle to discuss religious problems – so speaking with me as not just a researcher but also a fellow Christian became a part of their coping with the situation; in many cases the resulting interviews turned out to be very open and emotional (see also Urbanovich 2015 for an account of a similar experience).

In total, I conducted interviews with 40 people. The convenient sampling organized through Facebook led to certain biases though I aimed to achieve as varied a group of research participants as possible. First, the majority (33

out of 40) were women: this is a result of both myself being a female (and the resulting deviation in my contact list), and of the fact that females form the majority in most Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) parishes in Russia. 25 of the research participants lived in Moscow (also a result of the social structure of Facebook and my own contact list), and the others lived in Moscow region, Saint-Petersburg, Yekaterinburg, Kazan, Nizhniy Novgorod, Sochi, Tver, and four participants were Russian-speaking people with post-Soviet background living temporarily or permanently in the EU countries. All of them have a university degree; some are social researchers or practicing psychologists and are deeply involved in digital practices. This means that the results of the paper are valid primarily for the well-educated and (at least relatively) well-off believers, mostly from big cities (or living out of the cities as a lifestyle choice rather than as a confinement), whose digital involvement is not limited by lack of digital literacy, fear of technology or infrastructural deficit.

My research focused on the practices of Russian Orthodox Christians who formed the majority of the sample (35 people). However, I also conducted a few interviews with Catholic and Protestant believers, both to have some comparative material and to help myself to estrange from my own religious field (Levkievskaia 2015). Although I did not plan it, the Orthodox research participants also proved to be from very different religious communities, currents, and positions: from conservative to liberal and ecumenist, from people routinely involved in collective religious practices online to people strongly opposing any digitalization in religion.

All the interviews were conducted through different media (video calls on Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, Zoom, Skype; in just one case it was a telephone call without video connection). I used desktop versions of the abovementioned to ensure stable connection, good quality of audio recording and also to be able to see the facial expressions and emotions of the research participants. They, in their turn, could engage in the interview on computer or on mobile phone, but even being on the move during the interview, they tended to switch on the video if their Internet connection allowed them to do so. Distanced interviews allowed me to get almost simultaneous reflections of people living in different cities (the majority of interviews took place within only 10 days), which was very important in the unstable and uncertain situation of the pandemic. Of course, discussing sensitive questions in this way was a challenge: technical problems and low sound quality were disrupting the talk and its confidential feeling; in some cases, we had to abandon video in order to maintain the web connection and this emasculated the non-verbal communication. Still, distanced interviews provided a certain feel of safety for the interviewees and helped them to be open with a total stranger (see, e.g., Croes et al. 2016;

Howlett 2022 for similar experience). Video connection, in its turn, allowed both me and my research participants to look inside each other's privacy. Looking at the bookshelves behind my back, they got a verification of my professional belonging (as they confessed); for me, in my turn, it was important to see the spaces where they celebrated Easter online.

APOSTASY OR OBEDIENCE?

Inaccessibility of church services on Holy Week, Easter, and Easter week (the Week of the Renewal) proved to be traumatic for many believers. Some of them decided not to attend services regardless of the lockdown because of the risks to themselves, their family and other parishioners. This rational decision made the situation more bearable, though hard for them.

Still, most of the research participants did not consider the pandemic risks significant, and for them non-attendance at services was an involuntary decision taken under fear of being stopped by the police and fined for the violation of the lockdown regime. This category of believers typically reported a feeling that they had failed an important "loyalty exam". For Christians and Russian Orthodox believers in particular, the idea of profession of the faith up to the level of martyrdom is an important part of their identity and aspirations as believers. In post-Soviet countries, this idea is strengthened by frequent exploitation in the religious discourse of the image of the new martyrs who stood for the faith during anti-religious persecutions in the Soviet period. The closing of churches reminded many believers of this period, and they felt they had to behave similar to the people who attended church services despite hardships and fear of oppression and even death. It is not surprising, then, that they commonly spoke of a feeling of apostasy and betrayal.

The opportunity to participate in the mediatized ritual was also perceived ambivalently. Though many people used this opportunity, they spoke of this experience in terms of alienation and imitation. This was not an effect of the media per se, because in most cases digital platforms were not even mentioned (however, few people noticed that it was embarrassing to watch a religious service on YouTube – a platform associated with light-minded videos with cats and makeup tutorials). This sense of alienation, the weirdness and loss stemmed from other reasons.

The first of them seems to be the lack of previous experience of watching live streams of services. Research participants often told me that their older family members used to watch the Easter service broadcasted from the Christ the Savior Cathedral in Moscow led by the Patriarch, but they rather avoided

this before lockdown even if they could not manage to attend the service (for example, mothers of small children frequently have to abandon the night service because they have no one to look after the child while they are absent from home and cannot take the infant with them because the Easter service ends hours after midnight). Being asked about the reasons of this avoidance, they mostly mentioned the commentary behind the screen accompanying this live stream, aimed to inform viewers of the scenario of the Easter service, its symbolic system, and the overall meaning of this festivity. This commentary was perceived as a nuisance and an obstacle, turning the religious practice into a lay spectacle and interfering with the sound of the service; some compared it with a football match commentary. The image of the service was also disturbing for many: the demand of spectacularity leads to constant changes of different camera positions and angles, which is also associated rather with a TV show or a movie than with a religious ritual. Since the broadcast from the Christ the Savior Cathedral kept a monopoly for the Easter service on TV for years (other broadcasts were rare, marginal, and not widely known), this format became the key association with religious broadcasts and prevented many believers from even trying to watch one.

Still, many of the research participants had some previous experience of consuming mediatized religious content: they commonly listened to sermons or *akathisti* (religious hymns of particular form) on the Internet, on the radio or TV. Some used to watch the broadcast of the Descent of Holy Fire in Jerusalem. Finally, some of them started to watch live streams of services during lockdown before Easter and developed certain patterns of interaction with this new format. This group of "experienced audience" was generally less frustrated by the lack of instructions on how to behave during a service broadcast than those who had never had this experience before Easter 2020.

The second reason is based on bodily practices. It is important here to notice that in Russian Orthodoxy the patterns of behavior during religious rituals (including one's clothing, gestures, body position, speech acts) are quite rigid and traditional. Moreover, this formal and visible side of practicing religion is crucial for a person to be identified as a member of the ROC community by oneself and by others. For example, it is considered a particular virtue to be able to stand still without moving during the service lasting sometimes for several hours – "stand like a candle in front of the icon"; making the cross gesture in the wrong way or at an improper time during the service may result in a reproach from a person standing near you, etc. This means that instructions on bodily practices sanctioned by the church hierarchy are not just welcome but vital for any new religious practices.

However, these instructions for participating in the liturgy online started to appear only weeks after Easter – and even then, in the form of private opinions of priests rather than official regulations. As a result, my research participants had to improvise during the main service of the ritual cycle, reinventing the ritual for themselves. This had a twofold effect. Some perceived it as a challenge strengthening the feeling of uneasiness and alienation. Others felt it as a long-awaited opportunity to increase one's agency within the Church. Further, I will investigate the models and mechanisms of ritual reassembling during the mediatized service.

PRIVATE SPACE AND MATERIALITY OF RITUALS

Both in social media texts and in the interviews about Easter online, one frequently notices a phenomenon of crossing the border between home and inaccessible churches with the help of a speech mechanism that I shall call here "discursive transgression". Fully aware that they spent the Easter night at home, people framed their experience as movement to and presence at not just an abstract "service", but a specific physical space. To list just a few examples, they could say, "I went to (a particular) church", "my place is in my church", "you are not supposed to go to church in your pajamas" (a person said this to explain why he changed his clothes before the broadcast of the service started), etc. We see that the border between the two spaces disappears in the virtual space of broadcast, and a viewer becomes (as many of the interviewees stated) a participant in the ritual. In the next paragraph, I will investigate what helps this transgression and what blocks it.

The key problem of participation was the lack of possibility to receive the Sacraments during the service. This practice is the core of the Christian community, physically linking the faithful to Christ and to each other, forming the material church as Christ's earthly body. Along with minor bodily practices like kissing icons, the cross or Gospel Book, personal bodily contact with other people, such as getting a blessing from the priest (in which a parishioner kisses the priest's hand and the priest simultaneously touches the person's head), and participation in the Eucharist accentuates the importance of material communication and copresence in the ritual. Inaccessibility of these practices during lockdown leads to a sensation of deprivation and loss (Suslov 2021). It is important to mention that for many the possibility to receive the Sacraments might be purely theoretical but still important. For example, Anna[2] (60+ y.o., a retired woman from Moscow) told me that before the COVID-19 pandemic she sometimes used to sit in the churchyard and listen to the service through

a loudspeaker rather than stay inside, but she felt that she still had the possibility to enter and take the Sacraments if she wished to do so, and this potential kept her feeling her participation in the ritual.

In the situation of the lack of a key element of the service, other things became focal in maintaining copresence. The most important element was the unity in time: the believers wanted to follow a unique liturgy taking place synchronously, now – if not "here and now", – a broadcast rather than a record. As Maria (60+ y.o., a psychologist from Saint Petersburg) put it, if the prayer takes place simultaneously in churches and in believers' homes, it is a form of a synodic prayer (which differs considerably in essence and effect from the individual one). Another person I talked with, Rina (35+ y.o., a housewife from Moscow), even said that if she watched the record of the night Easter service next morning, she would perceive it as totally another (morning) liturgy.[3]

Another key factor was a smooth online connection without ruptures. When being present in a church physically, people tend to change places, divert their attention from the prayer to speak to someone, light a candle, or even take a pause and go out of the church. Still, they feel that they are inside the ritual space. In the situation of an online live stream, any pauses (technical ruptures or purposeful disconnections) were perceived as being forcefully "thrown out" of this sacral space and estranged.[4] In some parishes, live streams were put on pause during the Cross Procession or giving communion to the faithful in order to hide the illegal presence of laymen in the service. Understanding this, the viewers often felt maximal frustration and guilt because they did not make an effort to participate physically in the service at risk of being sanctioned or persecuted, while others did so.

The viewpoint of the broadcasting camera also proved to be important for maintaining copresence. For example, the camera could be positioned to mimic the point of view of a believer during the service: located at eye level with a straightforward view of the iconostasis and the altar. As the research participants used to define it, this viewpoint was perceived as an invitation to participate (and being lucky enough to stay in the first row with no one in front closing the view – which is not a frequent opportunity during the crowded festive services). As Andrey (40+ y.o., a manager from Moscow) put it, "it was as if someone took my eye and put it in the church".

A different effect was produced in more professional broadcasts with several cameras showing different views: the service in front of the iconostasis; the choir; candles somewhere in the back of the church; the ritual inside the altar part of the church (normally invisible for the ROC laymen); a view of the church from above; etc. In most cases, people perceived this as a spectacle, with a feeling preventing them from immersion into the ritual space, while others saw it as

a way to promote an idea of the uncommonness of what was taking place. For example, Marina (35+ y.o., a teacher from Saint Petersburg) told me that she perceived a possibility to look inside the altar as a truly Easter phenomenon: "the doors are open, and we are invited inside"; on the other hand, for Svetlana (40+ y.o., a literary worker from Tver region) the same seemed unnatural, because as a female she was not normally supposed to enter the altar space, so her mediated "presence" there seemed to her as a violation of the normal practice and rules. Thus, camera operators and directors of the broadcasts became important actors in the Easter service. Heidi Campbell and Oren Golan have noted that "new authority roles such as the webmaster, moderators or forum managers who govern behavior online serve as gatekeepers, allowing or denying access to the community and setting standards of accepted practice" (Campbell & Golan 2011: 717). In my case, the people producing the live streams became these gatekeepers, allowing (or not) the viewers to participate in the ritual throughout the service. Actually, the participation was only possible when the gatekeepers' actions were either invisible or corresponded to the regular scenario of the service.

The possibility to adapt the space to the needs of the body or, vice versa, the necessity to adapt oneself to the space turned out to be another feature that defined copresence. My interviewees frequently told me that it was more comfortable to stay at home on Easter than go to church: one could sit on a soft sofa (normally the ROC members stand throughout the service, even if it lasts for hours), take a cup of tea or coffee, have unlimited access to the toilet, etc.; all these features are more or less inaccessible in the majority of ROC churches. One's home is a territory of comfort where one can follow one's bodily needs rather than prescriptions. Still, this comfort destroys the sensation of copresence. As many people related, it was often hard to stand during the hours offline service and experience pains in the legs or back, sultry air, people pushing their way through the crowd or talking and distracting from prayer. But exactly this uncomforting experience denominated the physical presence in the church, the need to discipline one's body in the ritual space and, hence, to be involved in the ritual.

This sensation is not limited to the idea that asceticism and bodily deprivation are essential to progress in faith (though, of course, they are strongly connected with it). Research participants frequently referred to a whole complex of bodily sensations, which they found to be characteristic of being present in church but were unattainable at home. First, these were kinesthetic sensations: the feeling of the location of one's body in space in relation to material objects and other people's bodies. During festive services, a church is often crowded, and people stand elbow to elbow (on the importance of touch as constitutive

element of reality see Ratcliffe 2013) and have to control their movements in order not to push someone while making the sign of the cross, not to set the hair or headdress of a person in front on fire with the candle they are holding, and to avoid bowing to icons or being dangerously close to a candlestand. Other types of sensations that were mentioned were sounds of people moving and whispering or children crying; olfactory sensations of burning incense and candles; the smell of people; stuffiness; and a sensation of people breathing – hard to describe but nevertheless very frequent in interviews. All these sensations form a feeling of copresence in a thick space full of information, which is essential for sociality (Boden & Molotch 1994). Donnalee Dox has stated, "As quarantine disrupted visible body-to-body religious gatherings, it also disrupted the ways those gatherings bind people's bodies – eyes, mouth, skin, nose, ears, and organs – to a shared sense of transcendence" (Dox 2020: 6).

Interestingly, copresence was sometimes ruined not only by the lack of physical closeness but also by the lack of physical distance between the sacral/public and profane/private. Nikolay (30+ y.o., a researcher from Moscow) said that after the service he and his wife decided to go out to restore the feeling of participation by sensing the movement of air and seeing a "real church". Irina (30+ y.o., a media manager from Moscow) followed this thesis by saying that she lacked the need to "stand up and go out", make an effort, and walk a certain distance to the church.

People make special efforts to close performatively this gap through precisely keeping to ritual regulations on gestures, singing, and exclamations. In other words, they follow the customary practices to disconnect from the space of their homes and connect to the ritual space of the church. As Elena (30+ y.o., a researcher from Moscow) put it, it is important to behave during the service in the same manner as in church, for example, to stand or kneel when needed, because this is an act of transforming the space around. Some of the interviewees selected specific practices from the ritual vocabulary without following the Typicon literally; for example, they sat down during watching the live stream of the service and only stood up in particularly important moments, watched it standing on their knees; sat still through the service but made the sign of the cross and bowed where appropriate (as they often said, reflexively). Dina (25+ y.o., an IT schoolteacher from Moscow) said that she decided to take the occasion and sit through the service to focus on the rituals rather than her aching legs, but for ascetic purposes, she selected a hard stool instead of a soft chair.

Some people even tried to reenact some activities that do not suit the space of a house – a cross procession among them. Such processions are performed before the beginning of the night Easter service: all present, led by the clergy carrying icons and crosses, exit the church and go around it in a candle proces-

sion with festive chants and prayers before entering the church again for the service proper. For example, Yana (20+, a speech pathologist from Moscow) said: "I made a cross procession with a candle around the flat, because the live stream was not taken out for the procession, they left the camera in front of the iconostasis". This practice was more frequent for larger families with children but not limited to them. Some people only switched on the broadcast after they had performed the improvised cross procession.

In the meanwhile, some of the interviewees noticed that participating in the ritual online allows one to behave and express one's religious feelings more freely than in church without risking being reproached or frowned upon by the people around them. For example, some of them felt the urge to kneel or raise their hands at certain moments (which is not a common ritual gesture in ROC). Others said they could finally allow themselves to sing the chants loudly, while normally they would avoid it so as not to mess with the sound of the choir. In other words, online participation led to the growth of one's agency to develop one's own practices of prayer (Dubovka 2020: 16).

Many people (especially women) were very attentive to their choice of clothing and overall preparation of their body for the service. During the twentieth century, ROC developed a specific vernacular standard of dressing for the church for females, which includes a compulsory long skirt covering the knees and a head scarf (or other object to cover one's hair) and implies overall modesty: covered body parts, lack of decoration, and specific colors (currently, the tradition of dressing in dark colors is eroding and an unspoken custom to dress in the colors of the festivity – e.g., red for Easter – is becoming more popular). This standard deviates significantly from everyday wear and requires that a woman prepares herself for a church service specifically, and this makes routine visits to church unrealistic – one cannot pop in on one's way wearing jeans – so the sacral space of the church becomes alienated from the profane daily life. This form of clothing is also quite welcome for private prayer, but in this case, it is followed by few women. In the situation of a mediated ritual, many of the interviewees felt lost: they found themselves in a hybrid space of "church at home", which made both possible variants – dressing for the church or staying in home clothing – not quite appropriate. As a result, they sought for some balance between their "everyday body" and "ritual body": for example, they put on the skirt but not the headwear (or vice versa), put on "decent" home clothes instead of comfortable pajamas, put on makeup or not. For example, one of my Catholic interview participants, Svetlana (25+ y.o., a researcher from Belarus), said that she put on a smart dress appropriate for a festive occasion but skipped makeup, though she normally applies it when preparing for a church service. Svetlana, like many other women facing this difficult choice, spent the Easter

night and the service alone, without anyone seeing them – so these preparations were not aimed to gain praise from family members or friends.

The spaces of homes were also prepared to incorporate the mediated sacral space of the ritual. Cleaning or replacing objects, including changing their function from profane into ritual, literally created a space of (and for) prayer. Some of the research participants paid more attention to Easter house cleaning than usual (and were particularly precise about the tidiness of the room where they planned to watch the service) because, as they said, the liturgy was to take place in their house. As we have seen above in the case of the ritual wear, the one-way connection between the house and the church was often perceived as mutual. Though obviously no one in the church could see what happened in the homes of believers, they often said that it was important to maintain tidiness, at least in the frame of the gadget camera.[5] They also created a particular atmosphere by turning off the lights and lighting candles, putting icons on the tables and window stills, in other words, by focusing on sacral objects and "switching off" the profane ones to concentrate on what was going on on the screen rather than around them.

RITUAL ON SCREEN

Another important challenge was locating the gadget with the broadcast in relation to other objects and the bodies of people. In the interviews, three different strategies appeared. The first was locating the gadget close to the icon corner or even in it – in other words, to physically mix material icons with the virtual image of the church. This approach placed the participation in a mediated ritual into the customary frame of a daily private prayer. On the one hand, this was convenient because a person did not have to invent his or her prayer space: it was already prepared and helped to focus on the ritual. On the other hand, however, it was not associated with (and even contradicted) the communal church prayer. The second strategy was to locate the gadget away from the icons. This often happened with larger and less mobile screens (a TV or a PC), which turned out to be mostly located in the corner opposite the icons as ultimately profane objects.[6] People characterized this as a weird experience: they had either to turn their back to their icons during prayer or, addressing the latter, to miss the visual side of the broadcast, limiting the experience to sound. It appeared (and my interviewees confirmed) that material icons have a higher sacral status than their image on screen, though normally a church icon has a higher status than a home one. The third strategy was to place a material icon on the gadget, leaning it against the screen. In a certain way, the icon made the space deeper, more tactile and "real", connecting the home with the church.

Importantly, many people used more than just one gadget during the broadcast. The problem of the first screen and the second screen has been well investigated in football studies: the second screen during broadcasts is often used to browse for additional information on the web, communicate with other fans, or participate in interactive games and gambling (Pfeffel et al. 2016). The situation with online rituals appeared to be similar.

The main (first) screen used to host the live stream of the service was perceived as an icon of the church and treated with corresponding respect during Easter night: it was placed among icons with a candle in front of it and was rarely moved during the service. Other digital applications were turned off so as not to interfere with the service. The second screen (most often, a smartphone) was used as an online prayer book and as a means to communicate with other members of the "virtual parish" during technical ruptures to ensure that they were not alone with the problem. Sometimes another live stream from a different church was switched on on the second screen (constantly or from time to time, to compensate for the ruptures in the original broadcast). For example, Evgenia (30+ y.o., an advertising professional from Moscow) said that during Lent she used to watch broadcasts of services not from her own parish, where live streams were not performed, but from a different church, and developed a strong emotional connection and sense of belonging to the latter (even though she had never been there physically). On Easter night, her parish announced a live stream, which Evgenia was very glad to hear, but she felt a need and a moral obligation to connect to her new virtual parish as well. As a result, the main screen hosted the service conducted at the "native" church, and the second screen showed the broadcast from the new parish.

The second screen was also used to develop a certain virtual community of people participating in the same service distantly and recreate the feeling of belonging (Lundby 2011). Zoya (20+ y.o., a student from Moscow) said that she spent Easter night with her parents, but her grandmother had to stay away from them at her home. Nevertheless, they all watched the service conducted in the same cathedral. Both Zoya's family and her grandmother used their TV sets to watch the service and connected with each other through a WhatsApp video call on their smartphones, so they could feel that they were visually together and could discuss what they saw in parallel to the service. This was a popular strategy: connecting with relatives and friends could be constant or temporary, with different practices performed through the second screen – from text greetings to prolonged video calls. For example, Yana took her second screen with the video call to the improvised cross procession around her flat, and then they performed the traditional Easter egg tapping "through" the screen. Nina (50+ y.o., a researcher from Yekaterinburg) said that they offered her teenage

son's girlfriend to take her to the night service with them, but could not do it due to the lockdown. So, they called her on WhatsApp and watched the service broadcast on the same first screen together despite the distance.

At the same time, maintaining the connection with the parish and particularly the priest was a problem for many due to a lack of feedback from the live stream. Obviously, the clergy could not see or hear their distributed congregation, and did not have the possibility to read comments during the live stream and react to them (which is an important and already customary and expected feature for YouTubers). However, both the clergy and the faithful made certain steps to transgress the distance and the border visualized by the screen. As Lucy Osler states, "even though online sociality is often depicted as disembodied communication … our lived bodies can and do enter online space … we have direct empathetic access to others and their experiences even when their bodies are technologically-mediated" (Osler 2021: 3).

It was very important for believers to see the emotions of the clergy and feel their own involvement and participation in the ritual, to gain the sensation that they feel the same as those who are physically present at the church. Because of that, many people sang the chants along with the choir and answered the ritual statements of the priest, even if they were alone in their homes or felt uneasy addressing this to the screen. As Dina told me, when the priest exclaimed, "Christ is risen", she always answered aloud, "Indeed He is risen!"[7] not because she believed the priest could magically hear her, but because she knew that the priests would expect the distant believers to keep the ritual. For her, the answers maintained the shared ritual space and copresence at the liturgy. As Lyubov (40+ y.o., a psychologist from Moscow region) mentioned, she had a feeling that "her home absorbed into the church along with the thousands of other homes". Some research participants also referred to the concept of the unity of Christians in the Holy Spirit, acting above distances and borders, and their exclamations were a part of this unity.

CONCLUSION

The mediated Easter service produced a complex system of communication and co-action between the actors of the religious ritual. The first screen allowed the believers to interact with the priest in the church, at the same time involving one's home icons in the church service. The second screen enabled people to expand ritual communication to involve one's friends and relatives, other viewers of the same service, and even other communities and locations, constructing an individual ritual network. This description only partially complies with the

idea of "online religion": rather than being more or less stable "virtual communities" or "virtual parishes", these networks were temporary and fluid translocal constructs. Rather than being "ad hoc publics" in the strict sense (Bodrunova & Smoliarova & Blekanov 2017), they were complicated entanglements of human and non-human actors, all fulfilling active roles in this communication between people and the transcendent.

To ensure one's copresence and agency in a distant service, believers used various strategies (or combinations) of engagement with time, space, and their own senses and bodies. The first was synchronization: watching simultaneous broadcasts or live streams of the service, acting ritually together with the priest and people in the church, communicating with other people involved in the same service. The second was the strategy of spacing (Löw 2016 [2000]). By constructing relations between the material objects of one's private space (icons, gadgets, and furniture), one's body, regimes of lighting, etc., people transformed the space around them to enable connection between home and church without trying to actually transform the first into the second. Paradoxically, the loss of physical experience in virtual communication made people focus on the role of bodily practices in religious life. Finally, the third strategy was the appeal to the customary: people tried to find grounds in their normal experience, like watching the live stream from their church, reenacted traditional practices and found analogies between deprivations of the mediated ritual and more customary hardships of being physically present at the church. The possibility of empowerment and growth of individual agency during the distant service, away from the eyes of others, often appeared unwelcome and fearsome.

Many of the people whom I interviewed described this experience of the Easter broadcast in the situation of lockdown as something new and productive for their religious life, something that helped to re-estimate certain aspects of the ritual and to return to the original meaning of Easter. However, almost nobody continued to watch live streams of services after Easter on a regular basis. Even on Easter week, they often tried to "repair" the experience by coming to churches and meeting friends despite all lockdown restrictions; the physical copresence and contact with material sacred space turned out to be crucial for the authentic religious experience.

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NOTES

[1] Available at http://instagram.com/p/B_MmnkspApF/#17890910959505837, last accessed on 16 September 2022.

[2] Hereinafter the names of research participants were changed to maintain anonymity.

[3] It is a frequent practice in many ROC churches to serve two Easter liturgies: the main one at night, and another the next morning so that children and the elderly who cannot stay up at night could participate.

[4] For example, in a research on watching a football match broadcast, it was found that even a one- or two-second delay is perceived as significant unsynchronization (Mekuria & Cesar & Bulterman 2012).

[5] It might be important that during the lockdown, most of my interviewees worked online, and before Easter they had already had significant experience of participating in Zoom meetings and the like, during which they maintained a certain "business look" for the camera.

[6] In many families in Russia (especially in rural settlements), TV is often placed in the sacral corner with the icons above or even on it; my interviewees turned out to have a very different attitude towards both profane and sacred things.

[7] A ritual exchange of exclamations at the Easter service in ROC and a believers' greeting until Ascension.

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