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Technological otherness in mediatization of religion: The example of the *Foma* project

Аннотация*.* На примере проекта «Фома», действующего по благословению Русской православной церкви, но финансируемого светскими источниками, в статье рассматривается работа религиозного медиапроекта с фрагментацией аудитории, характерной для всего современного медиапространства. Автор выдвигает гипотезу о том, что разнообразие современных технологий, позволяющих доставлять информацию с высокой степенью персонализации, приводит к появлению нового типа инаковости — технологической: вместо представления «другого» в самом контенте современные разветвленные медиапроекты могут разделять информацию и доставлять разные ее части соответствующим сегментам аудитории. Опираясь на идеи глубокой медиатизации, новой материальности и материально-дискурсивного узла, автор предпринимает попытку выявить, как именно в мультиплатформенных медиапроектах работает связка материальности, контента и паттернов медиапотребления в этом переключении с инаковости в контенте на технологическую инаковость. Для проверки гипотезы автор анализирует платформы, на которых представлен проект «Фома», и форматы, с которыми он работает. Этот анализ дополнен материалами интервью с создателями и лидерами проекта, которые раскрывают их представление о медиапотреблении у аудитории проекта и как представление о медиапотреблении влияет на формирование повестки, выбор формата производимого контента и способов его доставки аудитории. По результатам исследования можно сделать вывод о том, что гипотеза подтверждается частично, а дальнейшая разработка предлагаемой идеи требует работы с более тонкой системой различений, в частности, в отношении того, какая часть материальности играет ведущую роль в формировании технологической инаковости. Анализ же выбранного проекта показывает, что разветвленная сеть доставки разнообразного контента не только не работает на формирование нового типа инаковости, но, напротив, является стратегией ее преодоления.

Ключевые слова*:* технологическая инаковость, медиатизация религии, глубокая медиатизация, новая материальность, фрагментация аудитории, РПЦ, «Фома»

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Technological otherness in mediatization of religion: The example of the *Foma* project

Abstract. Using the example of the *Foma* project, which operates with the blessing of the Russian Orthodox Church but is financed by secular sources, the article examines the work of a religious media project with audience fragmentation, which is characteristic of the entire contemporary media ecosystem. The author puts forward the hypothesis that the diversity of modern technologies that allow for delivery of information with a high degree of personalization leads to the emergence of a new type of otherness — a technological one: instead of presenting the "other" in the content itself, modern multi-platformed media projects can divide information and deliver different parts of it to the corresponding segments of the audience. Using as a base the ideas of deep mediatization, new materiality and the discourse-material knot, the author attempts to identify how exactly the link between materiality, content and patterns of media consumption works in multi-platform media projects in this shift from otherness in content to technological otherness. To test the hypothesis, the author analyzes the platforms on which the *Foma* project is presented and the formats with which it works. This analysis is supplemented by interviews with the creators and leaders of the project, which reveal their understanding of media consumption among the project audience and how the understanding of media consumption influences the formation of the agenda, the choice of the format of the produced content and the methods of its delivery to the audience. Based on the results of the study, it can be concluded that the hypothesis is partially confirmed, and further development of the proposed idea requires work with a more subtle system of distinctions, in particular, with respect to what part of materiality plays a leading role in the formation of technological otherness. Analysis of the selected project

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shows that the ramified network of delivery of diverse content not only does not work to form a new type of otherness, but, on the contrary, is a strategy for overcoming it.

Introduction

The 21st century has brought new challenges to religious institutions due to the universal trend of mediatization [Krotz 2009] when interactive media, platformization, and generative AI become a part of religious practices — and there always will be more new examples. As researchers state, one of the main challenges for religious institutions under such circumstances is "the communication of the sacred in the Church community and the media" which "takes place through many channels" [Stępniak 2023: 286].

This variety of new channels as a characteristic of the current state of the media sphere, as R. Entman and N. Usher argue, "significantly influences interpersonal, family, and organizational communication online and offline: how groups form, divide, open to new knowledge, and remain vulnerable to misinformation" [Entman, Usher 2018: 299]. Moreover, it also leads to fragmentation, when some segments of the audience ignore the existence of other segments, which results in their being radically divided in their information flows [Ibid.: 303–306]. This changing media ecosystem connects social patterns of media usage with the material availability of different media channels more tightly than ever, thus affecting what content is made visible to different segments of the audience.

It leads to the h y p o t h e s i s of a new type of otherness being created in this process — a technological one. By technological otherness I understand the shift from presenting the Other in the content to draw the distinction or even borders between different communities / groups / subgroups to segmenting the audience by these communities / groups / subgroups and communicating specifically with them, taking into consideration their worldviews and thus distancing one from another.

Previously, media researchers dealt with otherness that was mostly expressed through visibility of the Other in the distributed textual (in the broad semiotic sense of the term) content. The technological fragmentation that characterizes the contemporary state of the media field does not require that any longer, and

each smaller segment of the audience can interact with their own part of the information without contacting with the otherness. On a bigger scale this process has been traced by Andrew Hoskins more than a decade ago — the so-called 'connective turn': "The connective turn is the massively increased abundance, pervasiveness and accessibility of digital technologies, devices and media, shaping an ongoing re calibration of time, space (and place) and memory by people as they connect with, inhabit and constitute increasingly both dense and diffused social networks. Put differently, the stuff (people, relationships, objects, events) subject to the connective turn is potentially perpetually 'in-motion' and suddenly more visible through the connectedness of post-scarcity culture" [Hoskins 2011: 271]. The researcher showed how connectivity (and, thus, dis-connectivity) and the boundaries of communities nowadays depend on media infrastructures.

This affects the focus of control over information as well: nowadays control over information is implemented not only through the created and distributed content but also through the control of materiality of the media, especially through cross-sectoral and vertical integration of digital platforms [van Dijck 2020]. These material changes lead to one more methodological consideration: in order to analyze how communication works inside a community, researchers should focus on analysis of the strategies of content creators [Pavlovskii 2023: 33–35], who not only crystallize communities but also work as curators of the users' experiences in digital space [Kompatsiaris 2024].

The process that I propose to treat as a s h i f t f r o m d i s c u r s i v e t o t e c h n o l o g i c a l o t h e r n e s s makes the whole media processing of the Other different: technological otherness is less visible, usually not articulated and less reflected by the public. This hypothesis, however, requires verification and further exploration. In order to do so we need to:

(1) establish that media projects that are in the focus of our interest are based on diversified platforms and use extensive material infrastructure to target different segments of the audience (to sustain the idea of new boundaries being created, otherwise, if the same platforms and the same materiality are used, it can hardly be seen as a new type of otherness);

(2) establish that content is different on different platforms (to sustain the idea of targeting different worldviews);

(3) analyze how content creators reflect on the current ecosystem, the social patterns of media usage of the audience, and how all that affects the way they work with the content (interviews with the leaders of the project in focus should fill in this gap, providing the perspective of the content creators).

To clarify the last point, it's worth mentioning that theoretically it would be a simplification to state that it is purely new technological possibilities that drive these changes. As the theory of mediatization, as well as social construction of technology state, the social context also matters. Moreover, technology might not be seen as a set of black boxes that a researcher takes uncritically, but rather as a material infrastructure that can also be analyzed. With the intersection of the theory of mediatization, the new materiality and the discourse-material knot

serving as the basis, this article shows that the social patterns of media use create the impulse for switching to this new type of otherness.

In other words, this research aims at evaluating whether this (hypothetical at the moment) shift is happening and if so, tracing what social patterns of media usage potentially affect the creation and distribution of content, thus creating technological otherness instead of the otherness made visible in the content. As an empirical basis, the case of the *Foma* (St. Thomas) media project was chosen. Because the empirical part uses the case of a religion-related project, *Foma*, research on mediatization and new materiality will be applied with a focus on religion (mediatization of religion, new materiality of religion).

The *Foma* project, which communicates the ideas of Orthodox Christianity and the position of the Russian Orthodox Church (henceforth — ROC), will be analyzed as an example of a popular religious media project. This project is not the official media platform of the ROC but has its blessing, which means closeness to their ideas. The empirical part of this article that should be seen more as an illustration to the theoretical inquiry is based on (1) analysis of the infrastructure of this project that contains a number of sub-projects and (2) interviews with the founders and the leaders of the project: V. Legoida — the founder and editor-in-chief of *Foma* magazine, who also occupies the position of Chairman of the Synodal Department for Church Relations with Society and the Media in the ROC (the first lay person appointed to this post); V. Gurbolikov — first deputy editor-in-chief of *Foma* magazine and director of the *Foma* Center Foundation, he was also the founder of *Foma* magazine; and A. Sokolov — executive director of the *Foma* Center Foundation, also the person who generates ideas connected to new media and new formats for *Foma* projects.

Theoretically connecting religion, media and materiality

The combination of several theoretical resources will be used as the basis for this paper: (1) research on mediatization of religion as the optics that provides us with insights on how new technologies become a part of a segment of social life, (2) research on new materiality as the optics that focuses on how materiality has social meaning, and (3) the discourse-material knot as a theoretical framework that connects meaning creation with materiality. All three are compatible in many directions.

The appearance of religious media projects can be seen as a sign of mediatization of religion, when religion is influenced by the media. Today, in the epoch of deep mediatization, this influence is conceptualized through 'institutionalization' and 'materialization' of social practices [Couldry, Hepp 2016]: "...institutionalization refers to a stabilization of the patterns of communication and of expectations in the process: we know how a certain medium is typically used for communication, we communicate with the help of this medium in that way and we expect others to do the same. This goes hand in hand with materialization, which means that such patterns are themselves inscribed in the media technologies and the (digital) infrastructures that accommodate them. Messenger software, for example, materializes a certain way of 'talking' through its software-

based user interface" [Hepp 2020: 8]. When operationalizing this line of research one can work with the concept of affordances — the intersection of subjective perception of technology with its designed qualities [Gaver 1991] that dictate to some extent what content will be delivered through a particular media channel (for example, *Telegram* is conventionally seen as good for long textual posts, while VK — the first Russian social media platform created in 2006 that has affordances for adding videos, audio files, pictures as well as quite long texts — is mostly famous for its videos, etc.). This means that in order to analyze a project that reflects this process of deep mediatization one has to pay attention to the connection between patterns of communication specific for a medium and the material aspect of the media.

In the broader theoretical light, the absence of attention to the material could be traced in various social science disciplines, which could be explained, as suggested by D. Coole and S. Frost, by the traditionally marginalized position of materialism in the history of philosophy, by 'the exhaustion of once popular materialist approaches', or by the cultural turn that focused researchers' attention on non-material spheres [Coole, Frost 2010: 1−3]. Either way, in the last several decades interest in materiality has increased and has presented it not in the role of something 'naively representational or naturalistic' [Ibid.: 3] but rather claiming that "materiality is an integral dimension of culture, and that there are dimensions of social existence that cannot be fully understood without it" [Tilley et. al. 2006: 1]. Hence the new material turn, with its "attention to how people respond to and interact with material culture allows us to study their values, relationships, fears and aspirations" [Hutchings, McKenzie 2017: 4].

This new turn was not unnoticed in religion studies: as Meyer states, 'religion happens materially' [Meyer et al. 2010: 209]. Explaining the connection of the religious and the material, Hutchings and McKenzie [2017: 4−5] give such examples as "body," "sensation," "thing" and "touch" [Meyer et al. 2011: 5], 'ritual, daily practice, imagery, objects, spaces, and bodies' [Morgan 2010: xiii], or 'sensations, things, spaces and performance' [Ibid: 8], 'symbolic objects', sacred texts, special foods, buildings and human-made landscapes [Plate 2015: 3]. All these objects have a social role: "one of the functions of material religion is to mediate between individuals, communities and traditions, defining and penetrating the boundaries between them" [Hutchings, McKenzie 2017: 5].

Although it seems pretty obvious that the media mediate the human experience no less than symbolic objects or anything else, the material turn is often overlooked in studies of the role of a medium in the creation and distribution of content. It might be worth noting that a separate set of papers is devoted to just media materiality (for example, see [Friedman, Forde 2015]) or digital media [Allen-Robertson 2015]. Of course, there is also the classical formula of M. McLuhan "the medium is the message" [McLuhan, Lapham 1994]; there are also works on adaptation of media content [Cartmell 2012], as well as the research of R. Entman [Entman, Usher 2018, Entman 1993]. At the same time, there seems to be a research gap in c o n n e c t i n g   m a t e r i a l l y   d i f f e r e n t c h a n n e l s   o f   c o m m u n i c a t i o n   w i t h   t h e   s o c i a l   p a t t e r n s   o f   m e -

dia use that also leads to new strategies of content creation.

Research on 'minority churches' by D. Hall, M. Kołodziejska, and K. Radde-Antweiler [2023: 3] can be seen as a step towards this connection of social patterns of media use, materiality of media and media content in the area of religion. As a starting point for systematization of any research related to content production, the authors suggest a specific hierarchy: media environment — the media ecosystem at the level of a state, media ensembles —media channels chosen by an institution, and media repertoires — the media channels used by a person / content creator. This links patterns of media use with materiality.

On the other hand, the discourse-material knot proposed by N. Carpentier [2017] describes the connection between content (and meaning-making) and materiality. It is based on discourse theory by E. Laclau and Ch. Mouffe that allows researchers to evaluate hidden meanings and that has been actively practiced since the early 21st century [van Brussel et al. 2019]. As for the material in the proposed 'knot', Carpentier chooses some specific objects through which he sees the analysis as most fruitful, expressing interest in "a series of particular material configurations, namely (proto-)machines, bodies, organizational structures, and spatial orderings" [Carpentier 2017: 38]. One can see that this list partially coincides and partially overlaps with lists elaborated as part of religious studies of materiality, but it also has a strong focus on 'machines' that can be understood as media in general, or, if we want to get into details, devices that secure our Internet access and connection, algorithms / recommendation systems of the media platforms, access to the media platforms, cables, electricity and other objects related to media materiality.

But let's not forget about the social patterns of media usage. Previously, studying transmedia projects we realized that (inter)related content can be delivered via different media and can work in a complementary way [Gambarato et al. 2020]. At the same time, as C. Scolari and I. Ibrus state, research into audiences and users' stabilized patterns reveal "the diverse and distinct nature of users' behavioral patterns in different contexts: in different countries, in different productions or media platforms, and in different age groups" [Scolari, Ibrus 2014: 2194].

The wide availability of different media channels, sometimes used in the same way, sometimes differently at the level of a state / a (religious) institution / an individual content-creator, result in the experience of a user being partially guided by the materiality of media. It contributes to the idea of R. Entman and N. Usher about fragmentation of the audience, but at this point let's consider this fragmentation through the lens of materiality that creates a new type of otherness — technological otherness. It is not such a well-known otherness as the one created with estranging discourses [Wodak 2007; 2009; van Dijk 2008; 2015] that create the distinction among communities based on their description and media representation, but an otherness that is not usually articulated but rather is invisibly built into the distribution of content that is subordinate to the way different media channels work, to the nature of their affordances, and to the accessibility of the devices needed to access a specific media channel.

The context: mediatization of the Russian Orthodox Church

As stated before, the empirical part of this study is based on the case of the *Foma* media project. This places our research in the area of mediatization of religion, or, to be more precise, in the area of mediatization of the ROC.

Mediatization of the ROC, as E. Ostrovskaya notes, started in the 1990s, simultaneously with the mediatization of Russian society: "From 1993 to the 2000s, corporate (i. e., those regulated by the Church. — *I. D.*) and private media emerged" [Ostrovskaya 2019: 310]. It is worth mentioning that there were several attempts to catalogue all the media projects related to the ROC in different ways. Without being able to cover all the previous academic overviews of the ROC's digital projects, as an example we can use the book "Clicking on the Faith" (*Klikaem na veru*) by A. Volkova that aims to present how the ROC developed its presence on the Internet in the form of a popular science book with personalized storytelling. Despite its non-academic style, it contains information about a number of projects that could help one trace a significant part of the ROC's digital development. The year of the beginning of ROC mediatization is close to the one noted by Ostrovskaya and the logic is described in almost the same way:

> In 1994, when the RU domain was registered, a segment of the Russian Internet emerged. Researchers rightly note that at that time, official Orthodox institutions opened their web pages, and Orthodox radio stations and television channels *Spas*, *Soyuz*, *Tsargrad*, *Radonezh*, etc. expanded their broadcasting via the Internet. Orthodox websites Pravoslavie.ru, Tradanie.ru, Azbuka.ru, Pravmir.ru, etc. appeared, setting the task of digitalizing the entire existing Orthodox heritage [Volkova 2024: 7].

Of the above mentioned projects, Pravoslavie.ru was researched by E. Grishaeva and V. Shumkova in comparison with the periodical *Orthodox Newspaper* (*Pravoslavnaia gazeta*) as two examples of what they call traditionalist Orthodox Christian media. Analyzing the structure of the web portals, the agenda presented on them and other specificities, the authors conclude that Web navigation in these two projects is not well-organized or accessible for users. As for the content of Pravoslavie.ru and *Orthodox Newspaper*, "adapting the principle of relevance to church discourse, [they] interpret the news genre in their own way. The secular, worldly is considered as unimportant, pushed out of the scope of consideration. In "ON" (i. e. *Orthodox Newspaper. — I. D.*) there is a narrowing of the horizon: the whole world is the world of the church. The secular idea of relevance as a constant change of events is replaced by the cyclicality of church life: the most significant events are associated with religious holidays. Thus, a special Orthodox chronotope is built" [Grishaeva, Shumkova 2018: 306]. It is interesting how the elements of fragmentation of the audience in connection with the usage and organization of material infrastructure of media can be traced in the analysis of the two cases of religious media projects.

These first projects we can label as highly institutionalized; later the phenomenon of blogging on religion-related topics appeared. There is a set of studies on

this phenomenon, but the research of O. Bogdanova systematizes this process in a nutshell: "Mediatization of pastoral care arises from the combination of two types of reasons: from the audience (the flock, including potential) and from the priesthood. We consider reasons from the audience as their request for pastoral care in a mediatized form, and reasons from the priesthood's perspective as a response to the audience's request and their own request. The audience's request consists of two components: a request for personal communication with the pastor and a request for a clear and convenient format for such communication" [Bogdanova 2020: 228]. This line of inquiry is developed in research of dialogueness of Orthodox Internet preaching [Prokhvatilova 2023] in a study that combines interest in religious blogging with a focus on discursive strategies to form a new type of communicative space. Here again we can trace that even papers focused on separate parts of digital space reflect new mechanisms of building a dialogue between the content creators and the audience.

2015 was another milestone found in research into the history of mediatization of the ROC: this is the year when, according to E. Ostrovskaya, many significant innovations took place, such as "the establishment of the Synodal Department for Church Relations with Society and the Media, the reorganization of dioceses based on the principle of their unification into a media center, collaborations with secular media, digitalization of churches that opened their pages on social networks" [Ostrovskaya 2019: 310]. However, the author of the article, referring to the work of H. Stähle, "In Search of a New Language: The Media Strategy of Patriarch Kirill", notes that Orthodox media "avoid covering conflict issues and situations within the church environment" [Ostrovskaya 2019: 310]. This is a limitation that might be important for studies focused on the analysis of the media content as a part of mediatization that cannot yet be labeled as deep [Dusacova, Vladimirov 2022: 429–430], but it also might be less relevant for other research foci. In her later work, the monograph *Russian Church in the Digital Era. Mediatization of Orthodoxy*, Stähle analyzes media projects that oppose the official ROC position [Stähle 2021: 177–178]. It is worth emphasizing that Stähle's theoretical position is closer to political studies and is mostly focused on the political connections of the ROC with the Russian state authorities. This aspect of mediatization of the ROC is not covered in the present research, as it aims at connecting three aspects — patterns of media usage, media materiality and diversification of the content among platforms — that do not directly depend on the relationship of the ROC with the state.

The other agentic part of the mediatization of ROC — the audience of the religious media projects — was also studied at one of the stages of mediatization becoming deeper. Besides the typical reasons to use digital space, the researchers managed to distinguish some specifics about Orthodox users in their way of interacting with the Internet: it is "the opportunity to have a 'meaningful rest' and various kinds of spiritual rewards. In the first case, the technical capabilities of the Internet allow Orthodox users to realize the need for rest in a way that is different from that of secular users. In their understanding, leisure is not necessarily associated with the consumption of entertainment content, but simply with

receiving information that is meaningful to them and that coincides with their values. In the second case, the Internet mediates the experience of the transcendental, similar to other ways of its mediation" [Grishaeva, Busygin 2020: 13−14].

Getting back to the process of mediatization of religion and religious institutes that can be described in waves, as in most cases it reacts to external stimuli, one cannot miss the COVID-19 pandemic as one of the most influential stimuli. The pandemic intensified mediatized communication in all areas, including religion [Dushakova, Litvina 2025]. This stimulus led to deep mediatization — the new level of media interconnection that leads to transmedia user experience, AR projects and even reaction to AI. As for the AR projects, a whole chapter is devoted to them in the book that has already been mentioned, "Clicking on the Faith". This chapter, however, describes the tendencies of deep mediatization rather than provide the reader with examples. At the same time, there are several projects that could be seen as examples in this regard. Thus, the church of the Holy Martyr Antipas of Pergamon in Kolymazhny Dvor (Moscow) started a set of initiatives with the name *ANTIPA* that included a café, a magazine, a shop with hand-made objects, courses of lectures, etc. that are creatively represented in the media and augment the website of this church. The whole infrastructure of the *ANTIPA* initiatives could be analyzed in the future and might be seen as prospects of this study. Meanwhile, only an analysis of the café has been conducted [Ostapenko 2024]. As the latest example of research on the interaction of the ROC with new technologies, see the paper on how the ROC (as well as Old Believers) reacts to generative AI [Dushakova, Dushakova 2024].

The *Foma* media project: for those who are in doubt

As was stated in the Introduction, to prove the shift towards the creation of new technological otherness one has to establish that (religious) media projects can be based on a set of media platforms, thus using variable material infrastructure to target different segments of the audience. One more step here would be to establish that content is different on different platforms at least at the general level (with the prospect of analyzing the difference in context at the next stages of studying technological otherness in case it is proven to exist).

To trace these characteristics, the project *Foma* was chosen as one of the most visible projects that presents professional media production on multiple platforms and is officially approved by the ROC. Due to the fact that one of the founders of the project, Vladimir Legoida, is also the Head of the Synodal Department for Church Relations with Society and the Media and the spokesman of the ROC, it is natural to think that the content of this project is close to the official ROC position . At the same time, the project as a whole is not sponsored by the ROC, thus the production gets more secular and has more media logic in its functioning than, for example, the website of the ROC or other official ROC media projects (ones that E. Grishaeva and V. Shumkova term 'traditionalist Orthodox Christian media').

The *Foma* project was launched by Vladimir Legoida and Vladimir Gurbolikov, who wanted to create a space for people who were interested in religious

themes but were not so familiar with the Church (ROC). First, the magazine was published as an almanac in 1996. A bit later publication ceased for several years, but since 2004 it has been edited once every two months. Since 2005 it became a monthly issue, and it is still active as a magazine and serves as the historical core for the project. The whole idea of the project was based on the lack of proper understandable communication with people who were not so well-informed. Vladimir Legoida states:

> We wanted to read a story about the meaning of Orthodoxy addressed to a modern person in a language understandable to this modern person. Since it was the mid-90s, it was literally 1995, when Vladimir Aleksandrovich Gurbolikov and I met, ‹…› the Orthodox media space practically did not exist. It was very shrunken or small, and reprint reigned in book publishing. ‹…› We wanted to address a story to a modern person in a language understandable to him / her [Resp. 1].

Nowadays the *Foma* project has developed into a big network of smaller media projects connected by the initial idea of launching a dialogue with 'those who are in doubt'. This means that in addition to the fragmentation of the digital space that was discussed above, their audience is not united by any specific idea; rather, they are united by their uncertainty in their relationship with the church.

The infrastructure of the *Foma* project: variety of formats and going beyond digital

To cover this fragmented and 'disjointed' audience the project has developed a set of channels for communication with potential parishioners as well as 'those who are in doubt' and for distribution of their media products. An important issue in the light of the suggested hypothesis is that a set of *Foma* sub-projects, especially the most popular ones, is presented on several media platforms, duplicating the content on, let's say, RuTube, YouTube, Dzen, website and Telegram channels. This means that the entry point for analysis should be the sub-projects themselves or, even better, a list of sub-projects that would be explicitly stated as part of a bigger *Foma* ecosystem. It is also important that the visibility of the media projects' connection to *Foma* varies, thus raising the question of how this connection was established by the researcher[1].

Thus, being unable to list and describe in detail each *Foma* channel on different platforms, I will describe just some of them, starting with the ones that are promoted by the leaders of the project, and then adding some more channels to illustrate the logic of cross-references in this digital net based on snowball sampling. As an entry point, let's start with the post of Alexei Sokolov in his personal Telegram channel, dated by May 12, 2024 [Sokolov 2024]. As a brief reminder, Sokolov is responsible for the so called 'new formats' in *Foma*, thus, regarding new media his evaluation can be seen as the leading one. In this post he mentions

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[1] The issue of connecting any specific project to the official institution of the ROC was discussed in a more detailed way in [Dushakova, Vladimirov 2024].

that the audience doubled in size during May 2023 — May 2024 and reached about 10 million people a month. He marks two projects as the ones with which he is especially pleased — *Raisovet*[2] and *One-minute-(hi)story* (*Minutnaia istoriia*) that have significant numbers of subscribers on different media platforms. These two projects are implemented in different formats: *Raisovet* is a podcast, *One-minute-(hi)story* is a series of short animated videos. The official description of the first one states that "it is a conversation in which the characters sincerely share their pain and personal experience of faith; it is a space in which the viewer becomes a witness to the search for answers to pressing questions and the reflections of invited guests on current topics" [Raisovet n. d.]. *One-minute-(hi)story* is described as "a series of projects united by one idea — to tell [the audience] about the most important people, events and cultural phenomena in the history of Russia" [Minutnaia istoriia 2019]. In both cases format plays a significant role that defines to a certain extent what information will be delivered. Being distributed through several media platforms, they are also interconnected with their material infrastructure, as well as require a lot of professional equipment for production and postproduction processes.

There are two more projects mentioned in the same post — ones that Alexei Sokolov calls "the younger" projects, since they appeared later. These are *Spiritual Diary with Foma Magazine*[3] and the *Academy of Foma Magazine*[4]: they "are not so big yet, but they are quickly catching up" [Sokolov 2024]. As for the format of the *Spiritual Diary*, it is created as two sets of long videos: (1) *Good night, Orthodox people* (*Spokoinoi nochi, pravoslavnye*) is the authorial program of Archpriest Igor Fomin, where he reads "letters from saints and recalls stories from life"; there are also several episodes per week with Mother Olga Yurevich. These videos are intended to help people calm down before going to bed; (2) "Sunday conversation" — Father Igor Fomin answers questions sent by subscribers, gives advice and recommendations[5]. Thus, this project presents not only media content (created in a very trendy way of packaging) but also mediated communication with priests, which shows a deeper level of mediatization. It's worth emphasizing that an interactive format that involves the audience, allowing it to ask questions anonymously, is intertwined with popular but non-interactive communication. In this case one more material aspect becomes visible: when it's long videos, usually the space for the recording plays a role in the creation of the media product. There is also the issue of the professionalism of the people involved — sometimes it is also seen as a part of materiality. Thus, Vladimir Gurbolikov states that video content in general is tightly connected to the professionals "who can do editing, can read with professional voice for the audio in a correct manner, who can make audio, or other things in the studio" [Resp. 2].

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[2] A wordplay combining words *rai* 'paradise' and *sovet* 'advice', but previously this shortened form was used as one word that meant the phrase 'district council' in the Soviet times.

[3] *Dukhovnyi dnevnik s zhurnalom "Foma"* (Telegram channel). URL: https://t.me/Foma_ru_voprosy.

[4] *Akademiia zhurnala "Foma"* (Telegram channel). URL: https://t.me/Foma_academy. (In Russian).

[5] URL: https://Foma.ru/tag/duhovnyj-dnevnik.

As for the *Academy of Foma Magazine*, it is officially positioned as "an educational project aimed at creating training courses in various humanitarian fields: history, literature, psychology, fine arts, world culture, as well as theological disciplines: biblical studies, church history, the Orthodox Church. ‹…› *Foma* courses are a kind of new genre in which the reader can interact directly with an expert and receive feedback" [O proekte n. d.]. This project bears more resemblance to secular popular educational projects rather than anything that can be imagined as a course of lectures affiliated with institutions close to the Church. They have elements of gamification (the website offers a set of quizzes), courses in good media quality (with professional sound and image) of different length, personalization of the user's experience through a personal account. Not all lectures are free, some of the courses require payment, which is also a step towards community building going beyond the media (or digital) space. The same logic of involving the audience and turning it into a community through financial participation we can see on the VK *Foma* magazine page and the Telegram channel: both have a link to the donation system that allows people to support the project if they wish. Talking about going beyond digital, the post that I have referred to as the entry point for my analysis mentions two more things that link online and offline activities of the project: the magazine printed in paper was labeled as "unshakable", and the meetings with audience were planned [Raisovet 2024].

The whole *Foma* ecosystem comprises about 30 different channels [Proekty 2025] on VK, Telegram, YouTube, RuTube, Dzen. Continuing the logic of snowball sampling, let us take a look at the link-building strategies used in the core parts of *Foma*, especially in light of this diversity of sub-projects and the fact they most of them are presented on at least two platforms. The core of the *Foma* media ecosystem is *Foma Magazine*: a printed magazine, a website with branched structure, channels and pages on social media. Due to the specificity of the digital space in Russia, two platforms show the biggest growth: Telegram and VK. The *Foma* magazine Telegram channel has a bit more than 62 thousand subscribers and their VK page has 375 thousand followers.

The description of the page in VK contains 10 more links, including links to pages of content creators: a photojournalist of the magazine *Foma*, a columnist of *Foma,* and the editor of the "Culture" section of the magazine. These references also contain links to the bookstore of the magazine *Foma*, which makes the connection of the digital space and the physical world deeper, to *Radio Faith* (*Radio VERA*), to the social media platform Odnoklassniki, which is mostly popular among older people and coincides with the traditional image of the religious audience being mostly made up of older people, but also to Telegram and a YouTube video channel, much more popular among younger generations. One more project worth mentioning is "Questions of Vera and Foma"[6] —a children's Christian audio encyclopedia with a lot of edutainment content. A part of this sub-project is implemented in the format of podcasts, some other parts are cre-

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[6] See section *"Voprosy Very i Fomy" — novyi format liubimoi audioentsiklopedii* (Questions of Vera [Faith] and Foma [Thomas] is a new format for your favorite audio encyclopedia) (URL: https://veraifoma.ru).

ated as animated short videos about the history of Russia, history of Christianity and other topics; there are also visual digital games and a blog about upbringing and education, probably targeting parents that could recommend this resource to their children.

As for the Telegram channel, it has only two links, which can be explained by the difference between the digital platforms: VK allows more signs in the description of the pages, while Telegram requires a limited textual introduction. Under these circumstances the chosen links can show us the priorities of the project managers among the links: the one mentioned above that leads to the donation system, thus involving people in the activity of the project, while the second one leads to a list of other sub-projects on the *Foma* website.

There are many links to other resources inside these pages (analysis of the links among *Foma* resources, as well as links to external platforms could be another interesting research), but I will give just one more example that shows interference of the digital and physical and the resulting deep mediatization: it is selling games and presents created by the *Foma* crew on marketplaces. Information about this can be found in one of the Telegram posts from July 11, 2024 [Zhurnal "Foma" prodolzhaet vykhodit' na marketpleisy! 2024]. Of the three items advertised, I will touch upon the one that has the most elaborate description — "a meaningful gift from the magazine *Foma*, "Everything is known by its fruits" (*Vse uznaetsia po plodam*):

> The "Everything is known by its fruits" growing kit is a gift with a surprise that reminds you of something important! The plant growing kit has everything you need: an environmentally friendly cubic "pot" made of natural wood, seeds and special nutritious soil suitable for a specific type of plant. And what you will grow, you will find out over time. The main thing is to read the instructions: The Gospel of Matthew, chapter 13, verses 3—23. And do not forget to water [Ekokub n. d.].

To sum up this description, the developed media ecosystem of the *Foma* project highly relies on the materiality. This is the materiality of social media platforms, which means that the sub-projects are dependent on the affordances of these platforms and their recommendation systems, but are free to attract the audience with a material infrastructure that suggests a variety of entry points of communication with the *Foma* team close to the ROC, and also have access to the users of these multiple platforms. The second set of material objects that play a role here are the ones that provide communication built on deeper connections with materiality through the usage of material gifts or games, through involving the audience in the development of the project with donations. The layer that is less visible but is still connected to materiality is rooted in the patterns of the audience's interaction with the media.

To conclude this description, it is worth noting that each of the leading sub-projects of *Foma* is duplicated on several platforms, moreover, the platforms have links to each other and are not isolated from one another. This contradicts the idea of the creation of technological boundaries inside the bigger *Foma* project,

as it provides various possibilities for the audience to reach the same content from different media entry points, as well as it is present on platforms that are traditionally perceived as popular among younger generations or elderly people, etc. The general idea here is to be present on all the accessible platforms in order to keep more connections. As a fresh fact that supports this idea one can see the creation of the *Foma* magazine channel in the new state-promoted Max messenger [Sokolov 2025].

At the same time, despite the partial (technically adapted) duplication of the content, the sub-projects themselves are really different both in agenda and in format. The materiality that matters here is not so much connected to the materiality of media channels (although affordances still matter and should be considered in further research), but rather to materiality of the content that is dictated by its format to a significant extent.

The perspective of the content-creators: materiality, patterns of media behavior and the image of the audience

Let us consider how this materiality — including formats, devices and patterns of media usage by the audience — is seen and / or reflected by the leaders of this project, and whether they use it in connection to the general digital fragmentation. This will correspond to the third step mentioned in the Introduction: on the basis of interviews with the leaders of the project, to analyze how content creators reflect on the current ecosystem and how all that affects the way they work with the content.

During the interviews with *Foma* project founders and leaders, a number of questions were asked regarding the way they work with their sub-projects. A major topic of conversations with my interlocutors was the potential conflict between the format that might seem simplifying, as I put it, and the content itself. Questions about the way they produce their content for different media channels were articulated, while questions about materiality were never discussed specifically.

Nevertheless, the way the materiality of a specific media channel affected the content or its distribution were mentioned by the project creators. One of the brightest examples is connected to the already mentioned level of simplification of the content and the media channel. As Vladimir Gurbolikov describes the possibility of covering more sophisticated themes in the magazine:

> The specificity of the magazine, unlike other projects, is that under one cover you can place a variety of rubrics, a variety of thematic blocks in a single publication. In one publication, which is also regularly published and read from cover to cover. Accordingly, our mission is clearer for those who read the magazine [Resp. 2].

This idea raises the question of the fragmentation of the information on an even deeper level than the one that has been discussed: it appears within the limits of one project if we are not talking about something that materially unites several texts in one piece.

The cover of the magazine in this sense has both material and symbolic weight — it presents this 'one piece' and attracts attention. Talking about the cover of *Foma* magazine, Vladimir Legoida argues that

> ...for a publication of this kind, unlike scientific or other covers, this is an independent material, so, initially these were some artistic images, you can see this simply if you take a look. Then we had what can be even called 'glossy', a period when we used a simple move with a famous face on the cover, for which there were also accusations, so to speak, in 'light version' of Orthodoxy. And then we consciously moved away from this. Now the cover is always a kind of play, so to speak, of the meanings of words, combinations with pictures, etc. It is a completely independent material; it is not related to any material inside. It is a separate, so to speak, section, if you like [Resp. 1].

It is interesting that these tactical moves with the cover were working both for the audience that was attracted by a famous person, but also, as Legoida states further in our conversation, for the actors who felt their responsibility for the message they were sending to the audience even when working with other media.

Thus, the cover itself works both as a separate material artefact that can send additional messages or invite a new audience, and as something that unites everything that is within, materially holding the texts together.

The materiality of the whole magazine also works in another dimension: as a physical object, it can be stored in different ways, depending on its value. As Vladimir Gurbolikov states, there are many examples when issues of the *Foma* magazine are given to children by their parents. The other strategy, though, includes the marketplaces that were mentioned above several times:

> I see, even, I even did this, I re-bought on Avito[7], yes, in the ads, a very large number of ads with the sale of the *Foma* magazine, resale. That is, people consider it valuable, they do not throw it away [Resp. 2].

This logic of the media channel affecting the format and the content can be traced also in regard to social media, where each platform has its own specificity:

> I don't think there are platforms that are not suitable for communicating meanings at all. The question is, what task can you solve on this platform... Telegram has the most attentive audience in terms of reading. People read longreads there. Naturally, you can give them a long text to read, and we all understand that reading long texts is the best way to communicate with a person, if, of course, they are ready to read this text. But, let's say, no one will read long texts on VKontakte. These are short-format social networks and emotions. ‹...› When we want to dispel some basic stereotypes about the church or promote some kind of educational program, the opportunities that TikTok and anything else provide are quite enough for us [Resp. 3].

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[7] *Avito* is one the largest online platforms in Russia where an individual or a company may place an advertisement about selling or exchanging almost any goods or services.

One can see the tight connection among the technical specifics of a media channel with the preferences of the audience that uses this channel, and, subsequently, with the content delivered through this channel to this audience.

Several major factors, according to the content creators, led to this: the speed of emergence of new devices that appear so often that technology has no time to become a part of culture (Vladimir Legoida referenced Yu. Lotman's ideas about the role of new technologies in communication) and cheap Internet and cheap smartphones that changed the patterns of the audience (Vladimir Gurbolikov referred to this technological side of the process).

When talking about patterns, all three interlocutors mentioned recent changes they had to take into account while developing the media ecosystem of *Foma*. The major issue here is the way the audience finds this project in digital space. The website of *Foma* magazine that provides a lot of materials and could be seen as a digital core for the whole ecosystem is not working this way anymore. While mentioning the good statistics of website visitors (several million people per month), Vladimir Gurbolikov and Alexei Sokolov described new audience patterns in the media that affect distribution of content. First, people don't surf the whole website:

> [The audience] doesn't come to the main page. I come to the main page because I'm the editor, I need to see what's new, right? And people in Yandex write something, let's say, "Is it allowed to eat fish during Lent?" And they get *Foma* magazine, *Azbuka very*[8], there's more, more, more, right? And they, that means, they come straight there. That's it. And there's nothing you can do about it [Resp. 2].

Also, people who are aware of the project because of the good position of the website when people introduce their queries, do not constitute a stable, devoted part of the audience:

> We have a huge traffic from questions, let's say, dedicated to the ritual side of things. In this regard, we compete with sites that aggregate various SEO content, there, related to rituals, funerals, weddings, christenings and so on. And yes, of course, a quality audience still comes to our site. We see it, and for us it is a great joy. We understand very well how to work in SEO in order to hook not just anyone, but the audience that we need, but still, as a source of quality traffic, motivated, people from search engines are not those who can make up a good audience for a modern publication. People who came to us on social networks — yes [Resp. 3].

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[8] *Azbuka very* is one of the largest Orthodox Internet portals. Created in 2005, it aims to develop educational projects about Christian life for a broader audience, and includes electronic libraries, a forum, and a set of blogs. There are also some Christian-targeted apps developed as part of this project, which may be seen as the best example of attempts to deepen mediatization, as they not only present themselves in the digital sphere but also introduce technologies into the practices.

This might be explained through the fragmentation of the information delivered by such patterns:

> Search queries primarily read some specific reference materials related to the essence of prayers, psalms, commemoration of the dead, etc. And this does not reflect our real program [Resp. 2].

There seems to be no way to deliver it in bigger pieces, as in the printed version of the magazine:

> [Content in different social networks] can be duplicated, somewhere it can be presented differently, the same information can be presented differently. Well, but it has long been pointless to hope that social networks will play the role of a navigator that sends everyone to the website [Resp. 2].

At the same time, along with the disadvantages of the specific development of the current digital environment, it also offers new technical opportunities — recommendation systems, albeit with reservations:

> ...when Yandex.Dzen was launched in Russia, in RuNet, the largest audience of devoted readers came through Dzen. Today, most people come to us through YouTube, because YouTube recommended them to watch our video. Unfortunately, understanding all the threats, risks, and so on, associated with being on a Western platform ‹...› we are forced to focus on YouTube for one simple reason. Despite the fact that, we have, for example, VK which is technologically a good service so that you can quickly watch videos there, they do not have a recommendation system like YouTube, and a new audience will not come to us simply due to the fact that we post new videos [Resp. 3].

The last citation shows that materiality of the platform is agentic in the process of distribution of the content where this specific platform becomes important due to the popularity of video content today. Preferences of the audience that would rather watch a video than read a long text led to the increased role of media channels that not only provide distribution of videos but also make the content created in this format visible for a new audience. The problem though is still how much information this audience will get: as these channels allow a high level of personalization, the audience frequently gets smaller pieces of information that do not fully represent the general mission of the project.

If we know that the audience in many cases gets only segments / fragments of the information that is produced in sub-projects of *Foma*, what can we tell about this audience? All my interlocutors have a deep image of the people whom they address, but the main idea is variety among those people:

> For 500 Moscow schoolchildren there are 409 favorite bloggers. That's it. How can I, I don't know, a missionary, a PR propagandist, anyone, get to these 500 schoolchildren? No way. Because I don't have the resources to cultivate their 400 favorite bloggers. And this is a problem

that has not been solved today. And at the same time, relatively speaking, society was once divided into classes, then into estates, yes, and now what is it divided into? How is it divided? By sources of information consumption [Resp. 1].

An important issue for us has always been the age indicator of the audience. For *Foma* it is very difficult. It is very difficult to single out some kind of social demographic that characterizes our viewers and so on. We have a very diverse audience [Resp. 3].

At the same time, the ability to address an audience, which is now scattered across a huge number of countries, is an important, important moment for *Foma*'s mission, here, on the Internet. This partially compensates for the fact that you can't collect everything under one cover, but you can reach a very large audience [Resp. 2].

To conclude this part, let's systematize the patterns of media usage mentioned by the leaders of the *Foma* project:
— the audience is trying to obtain and process information as quickly as possible;
— the audience is looking for the most relevant information in small pieces with full content compliance with the search query, additional information may not be even noticed;
— the audience accesses different media platforms for different reasons, for example, Telegram is used for longreads while VK for bright emotions.
These patterns lead to a state when it will most likely be unsuccessful if one tries to deliver a lot of information in one piece or deliver it in a complicated form, in the form of texts only (video, gamification, involvement of material objects are required). This is taken into consideration in the process of content creation and distribution in the *Foma* project.
As a set of reasons for these patterns, my interlocutors mentioned the rapidity of emergence of new technologies, when they simply do not have enough time to become a part of the culture (with references to Yu. Lotman in the interview), but also relatively cheap and thus affordable smartphones and the Internet.

Conclusion

Testing the hypothesis about the emergence of a new type of otherness — a technological one — showed that, in general, we can talk about technological otherness rooted in materiality. However, a much more complex system of distinctions is required: it is not the materiality of media channels, but the materiality of media content tied to its format that plays the leading role. Depending on the material characteristics of the content, the selection of communication channels that allow broadcasting this format of content takes place: affordances that allow for the most comfortable delivery and receipt of a specific type of information become important. The format itself, in turn, is largely chosen based on the content creators' ideas about the patterns of media consumption of their audience.

The case study based on the *Foma* project showed that materiality might serve as resistance to fragmentation: non-digital materiality used, for example, in the magazine production, helps the creators literally "hold together" united bigger portions of information. It allows them to transmit less simplified meanings and deliver information that is not in small pieces. The symbolic weight of materiality also plays a significant role: the cover of the magazine is perceived as something connected to the character both of the audience that reads it and the people who are on that cover if the cover contains images of people. At the same time, the analogue of a cover for a website — the starting page — does not have that weight anymore due to changing patterns of surfing the Internet. The audience does not go through the whole website, only pieces of information relevant to their search queries present interest to the audience, thus making the starting page mostly irrelevant. At the same time, the digital part of the project infrastructure has significant characteristics unachievable for physical objects — they have algorithms of recommendations that might serve to connect new parts of the audience with the project. These algorithms are perceived as useful for the project, thus being one of the arguments on the decision of their being or not being present on a specific media platform.

The problem of fragmentation in the case of *Foma*, if not reflected in these terms, is recognized by all the interviewed project managers. Creators are trying to resist the growing fragmentation in content consumption and the disunity of the audience between platforms: the core value of the project is preserved in all the subprojects, just as efforts are made to maintain some commonality of the agenda — common topics for conversation. The diversification of information delivery channels arises partly as a reaction to manifestations of technological otherness and an attempt to slow it down for the target audience of *Foma*. These efforts are complicated by the heterogeneity of the target audience of the project. At the same time, it is impossible to talk about a strict division between platforms, because for now the projects are duplicated on several channels.

In other words, differentiation of the platforms and content in a variety of formats used in the *Foma* project does not create a new technological otherness but is aimed at opposing it.

Afterword: specifics of the *Foma* project in light of fragmentation

Being present on all available media platforms, the *Foma* project has grown from a printed magazine in 1996 into a developed media ecosystem today that communicates with a varied audience: these are people who are looking for some religious information explained in an understandable way, but also those who are interested in edutainment sub-projects, those who like gamification and podcasts and are attracted by formats, and those who saw recommendations of media platforms of content close to their interests, but are not necessarily religious. This audience is fragmented. Both the patterns of media usage of the potential and actual audience, and the materiality of the trendiest media platforms that have this recommendation system and give technological opportunities to work with different formats, to reach people across borders, make it impossible to overcome

fragmentation. In view of their deep understanding of the mission of the *Foma* project, its creators are constantly adapting the ways of delivering information, given this changing materiality of the media and the preferences of the audience. The main goal is not to unite the audience on a single platform but rather reach it through diverse channels, sub-dividing information even on the same platform. Thus, we face a situation where we are not sure whether it can be labeled as one project:

> And when they (specialists in the media. — *I. D.*) say that *Foma* presents different products, at first I panicked, I thought that we were breaking the laws of marketing, but you know, when I looked closely at what we were doing, I seemed to understand what they were talking about. Perhaps, in some sense I am even ready to agree that this can be characterized as different projects. But this does not bother me at all, because, firstly, globally it is still a *Foma* story, it is just really very... very different, maybe even at the level of the content itself [Resp. 1].

Thus, one can conclude that technological otherness is one of the barriers that requires focused efforts of a religious media project team to make communication of the sacred possible. This otherness has another nature, different from religious otherness that could be instrumentalized and emphasized in a religious media project:

> ...we do not seek to build an apology for Orthodoxy on criticism of other religious doctrines or on some confessional criticism in relation to, let's say, Catholics, Protestants and so on. We can sometimes record what our difference is. But in general, this principle itself, it is perceived by people far from the church as an element of a simple fight for the flock. That's it. But it levels out the real spiritual reasons for which the fight is going on. For which the dispute is going on, for which we cannot agree with something. And it is very difficult to make people understand what the matter is [Resp. 2].

Instead, as they state, they formulated a program "To show the beauty of Orthodoxy", "and semantically for us it does not mean a controversial presentation, not a story about sects, not a polemic with representatives of other religions and confessions" [Resp. 1]. Thus, religious otherness created by difference of doctrines and beliefs is not an issue for the *Foma* project, but rather technological division of those people who could be reached. Even the otherness based on the banal dichotomy of religious vs. secular is not used here, as one of my interlocutors noted that *Foma* totally agrees with the motto formulated by their colleagues from *Radio VERA*:

> ...we are trying to reach, that is, a non-church audience, but at the same time the church audience should consider us as their own, naturally their own. This is very correct, this applies to us entirely [Resp. 2].

This state might not be exclusive for the analyzed project, it rather reflects processes that are the same for all the religious communities that are trying to de-

velop their media visibility and presence, thus creating one more material aspect through which they can live their religion.

At the same time, the low number of projects that would be present on several media platforms shows us that in most cases religious communities are not fully aware of this new otherness that creates strong barriers between them and their audience.

Respondents

Resp. 1 — Vladimir Legoida, founder and editor-in-chief of *Foma* magazine, Chairman of the Synodal Department for Church Relations with Society and the Media in ROC, Moscow, recorded by I. Dushakova, N. Litvina, 2024.

Resp. 2 — Vladimir Gurbolikov, founder and first deputy editor-in-chief of *Foma* magazine, director of the *Foma* Center Foundation, Moscow, recorded by I. Dushakova, N. Litvina, 2024.

Resp. 3 — Alexey Sokolov, executive director of the *Foma* Center Foundation, Moscow, recorded by I. Dushakova, N. Litvina, 2024.

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