

# Exploring the mediatization of organizational communication by religious communities in digital media

Gry Høngsmark Knudsen and  
Marie Vejrup Nielsen

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## **Abstract**

*This article presents an exploratory study of some of the ways in which religious communities communicate as organizations in digital spaces. Based on previous research, the article examines the extent to which processes of mediatization are visible in the digital spaces utilized by religious communities in Denmark today. The study is based on data from websites and Facebook groups from ten Christian churches: five ELCD (Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark) parishes and five free churches. Data was collected using methods particularly designed for collecting digital data, with due consideration of the ethical implications of researching religious identity online. The data collection represents a follow-up study to the research project Religion in Aarhus 2013. Based on our findings, we suggest that mediatization processes progress more slowly in institutional religious communication because of the way in which they are organized. Furthermore, we demonstrate that there are some patterns in the way Christian communities express themselves online, and that these patterns to some extent depend on whether an ELCD parish or a free church is involved.*

## **Key Words**

*mediatization, religious communities, digital spaces, communication*

## Introduction

Religion has become highly mediatized, as demonstrated in previous research (Fischer-Nielsen, 2012; Hjarvard & Lövheim, 2013). Religious conflicts are debated in mainstream media (Christensen, 2012; Hjarvard, 2012), information on religion is increasingly sought through digital media, and churches communicate with their members through digital platforms (Fischer-Nielsen, 2012). This raises the question of how mediatization processes affect the communication patterns of religious communities. In this article, we explore the communication of religious organizations on two types of digital media: organizational websites and Facebook groups. We base our study on theories of digital media affordances (Boyd, 2010; Miller, 2008) to argue that specific religious organizations readily use new media channels, while in some respects they fail to align their style of communication and religious discourses with specific digital media types.

Although mediatization and religion is still a young field, there has been a range of studies of Muslim groups in relation to new media (for Danish projects see Sara Jul Jacobsen's study of Danish Jihadi groups online (2016), and Karen Waltorp's PhD dissertation on the use of smartphones among young Muslim women (2017). For international studies see Bartlett & Fisher, 2015; Horgan, 2008; Hussain & Saltman, 2014; Saltman & Winter, 2014). Christian congregations have not been studied to the same extent, and therefore a specific aim of this study is to follow up on the relatively few studies of Christian religious media practices (Campbell, 2010; Cheong, Fischer-Nielsen, Gelfgren, & Ess, 2012) to deepen our understanding of the ways in which mediatization processes influence religious organizations' online communication of their faith, belief system and religious practices. Recent research projects mapping religious communities in Denmark today have provided a unique starting point for the examination of official communication patterns across the divide of majority and minority communities (Ahlin et al., 2012; Fibiger, 2004; Ahlin, Fibiger, Jacobsen, & Nielsen, 2013).

First, we outline the state-of-the-art of recent theorization of the intersection between contemporary religion and digital media to demonstrate the gap in understanding how mediatization influences the digital organizational communication of religious institutions. In other words, our focus is not on how religious institutions are represented or act in external media contexts. Instead, we focus specifically on the pattern of communication on their official digital communication on sites which they control themselves.

Next, we develop the early stages of a methodology for collecting and analyzing digital data on religious organizations, focusing in particular on the intersection between digital data, ethics and the protection of vulnerable subjects and privacy relating to issues of religious beliefs. Finally, based on the analysis of both website and Facebook data, we discuss how two contradicting trends in organizational religious communication play out in digital spaces.

## Theories

The theoretical perspective of this article involves a combination of theories from research into contemporary religion *and* media studies. The recent synthesis of these two fields offers new insights into mediatization perspectives on how new media transform religious expressions (Fischer-Nielsen, 2012; Hjarvard & Lövheim, 2013; Lundby et al., 2016). The major focus in the mediatization perspective (Couldry & Hepp, 2013) is that media change domains such as religion in general and religious individuals and groups in particular, as well as the general public sphere (Lundby et al., 2016). For instance, religion is now primarily communicated to a wider audience through media contexts, which means that on average most Danes today get their information and views concerning religion through media reports on religious debates (Hjarvard, 2012). In this article, however, we build on the mediatization perspective developed in particular by Andreas Hepp, which distinguishes between mediatization as a general process that all media perform in society and *deep mediatization*, which deals specifically with digitization and datafication processes of digital media (Hepp & Hasebrink, 2018). The argument is that digital media intensify mediatization processes, which results in deep mediatization. In this article, we build on the concept of deep mediatization in order to focus on the specific communicative practices in which Christian institutions engage through digital media. A general mediatization perspective would entail asking wider questions of communication processes within specific churches, which has not been part of this study. Mediatization studies of religion focus both on analyzing patterns of transformation in relation to religious authority (Radde-Antweiler, Grünenthal, & Gogolok, 2018) and on the general question of the influence of new media in relation to the role of religion in contemporary society in political and public debates (Christensen, 2012). A further perspective with regard to the mediatization of religion investigates how media shape religious communication, both in the form of religious groups' use of new media and also sometimes in the form of a retreat from participation in media contexts by religious professionals (Christensen, 2017). Consequently, the question we investigate is whether and how processes of mediatization, that is changes in communicative practices, become visible in the way religious organizations communicate about who they are in digital media. At its most basic level, mediatization means being sensitive to changes in media use and asking, for example, if, when and how churches begin to communicate through digital media. It also means paying attention to the actors engaged in the communication (Hepp and Hasebrink, 2018) and changes regarding who can speak as a representative of the institution and how (Radde-Antweiler, Grünenthal and Gogolok, 2018). In other words, studying the mediatization of religion means both understanding how new media are adopted and how they influence communicative practices.

Previous studies have investigated how religious individuals and church groups organized themselves in digital media (Johns, 2012; Lomborg & Ess, 2012). In his PhD dissertation in 2010, Peter Fischer-Nielsen examined the use of new media in relation to religion in

the general public and the attitudes of pastors in the ELCD<sup>1</sup> towards media such as websites and Facebook (Fischer-Nielsen, 2010). His study points to connections between the theological positions of the pastors and their view of media. A small-scale study of the specific confessional identity of the ELCD website has also been analyzed (Nielsen, 2012). The question we are raising in this article is how mediatization influences organizational communication in digital media. Therefore, our study moves in a somewhat different direction than the studies above, because we focus on expressions of specific congregations in a selected area, across the ELCD and other Christian congregations, thereby offering a comparative perspective. The advantage of the comparative perspective is that it facilitates an understanding of the differences and similarities of mediatization in a variety of Danish Christian organizations. Consequently, we investigate whether mediatization results in a higher degree of mainstreaming and a tendency towards similarity and convergence across Christian groups, as they all engage with the same type of media and are influenced by the same new media logics. Other mediatization studies have shown that substituting one medium for another can have a major impact on the way an organization communicates (Knudsen, 2016). The underlying hypothesis of the question of mainstreaming is that mediatization processes are so strong that they might erase structural and historical differences between religious communities, creating a new common, mainstream expression of religion shaped by the rules of digital media contexts (Hjarvard, 2008; Lövheim, 2014).

At the same time, studies of contemporary religion point to the development of increased religious diversity. James Beckford, a sociologist of religion, has listed several forms of religious diversity at play in the late modern context (Beckford, 2003), and these discussions have been further developed by researchers in terms of how to understand religious diversity today (Ahlin et al., 2012; Fibiger, 2004). The research in this area points to a growing variety of religious communities in specific contexts such as Denmark.

Sociologists of religion argue that growing religious diversity is both situated in the complex processes of globalization, which has transformed relatively religious regional stability into diverse patterns, *and* linked to the high degree of individual freedom in relation to religion in the Western world. Researchers have focused on the overall patterns of transformation of religion from authoritarian, official religion to much more fluid, individualized religious expressions, often called 'lived religion' (Mcguire, 2002), 'everyday religion' (Ammerman, 2016), or 'patchwork religion' (Wuthnow, 1998). At the same time, researchers have underscored the need to study transformations within both the individual level and the institutional level of religious organizations. The challenge is to study the transformation of religion in the interplay between religious individuals and institutions; and in this article we engage with this challenge by studying religious institutional communication, thereby treating religious institutions as active agents expressing who they are in new contexts and through new media.

Studies of religious diversity and lived religion so far have not included the question of mediatization and mainstreaming, with a few exceptions (Christensen, 2017). We argue

that the question therefore is how to understand religious diversification and mainstreaming as processes of mediatization. Diversification and mainstreaming are two seemingly contradictory perspectives on contemporary religion, with one perspective focusing on a dynamic of mainstreaming through media, while other research focuses on growing diversity on the level of religious identities at play in specific contexts facilitated by globalization. The growing diversity in the Christian communities in Denmark therefore functions as a background for exploring the degree of mainstreaming produced by using the same digital media. This article sets out to explore whether and how diverse Christian organizations display a high degree of conformity brought on by the logics of digital media, or whether they express diversity online. Furthermore, we explore potential explanations for patterns of mainstreaming and diversification by employing a mediatization perspective as well as contextualizing Christian organizations relative to history, identity, and structural factors such as the age of the religious organization in question.

We contribute to the understanding of contemporary religion by including the study of communication by religious organizations in new media as a central part of the study of contemporary religion as well as in the study of new media. In order to do this, the article applies the approaches found in the study of social media affordances such as phatic culture (Miller, 2008) and strong emotional expression (Knudsen, 2012), which focus on individualized and embodied expressions of religion in particular (Ammerman, 2016; Riis & Woodhead, 2010). A final element of the research project is to further expand the field of studies of new media and religion by focusing on Christian minority religions in Denmark, thereby not just saying something about how one particular religious organization is changed by new media, but also exploring general patterns across organizations.

## Religion in Denmark today

In a Danish context, the economic and political structures of religious communities in Denmark consist primarily of two categories: the ELCD and all other religious organizations. The ELCD has a privileged position in relation to the state and a strong financial position. Other religious communities can apply for the status of "approved religious community", which provides certain privileges.

The ELCD is the majority church in Denmark, with approx. 71% of the population as members; and it has stable activity patterns, especially in relation to transition rites: baptism, confirmation, weddings, and funerals, as well as other culturally normative traditions like Christmas services, combined with a low activity pattern for Sunday services. The ELCD has a local presence, with the local parish as its primary institutional entity, and with a high degree of self-governance by the local parish council (Nielsen & Kühle, 2011). These councils have a large degree of freedom in relation to communication, including the use of media. Nationally, the ELCD provides an official website for all parishes, but many have chosen to have their own independent website, where they communicate

with their local congregation and connect with the local area. The local websites are set up by staff connected to the church or external consultants. There are no common rules or regulations for these media platforms, which means that local ELCD parishes can be expected to have a high degree of diversity.

Other religious communities occupy a very different position in Danish society. Churches that are very large globally, such as the Roman Catholic Church, are relatively small in Denmark. There are a little over 100 approved Christian communities in Denmark, with a total of about 100,000 members. Therefore, these Christian groups are also often culturally marginal in the Danish societal context. It is also important to be aware of the variety among these churches: some of them have a long history in Denmark and globally, whereas others are more recently established.

Due the large difference between the status and dominance of the ELCD and the other churches, our hypothesis was that this difference in context and framework would be apparent in the way they expressed themselves online. There are no previous studies of the institutional communication of religious communities online across the majority-minority religion divide in Denmark, so this project is explorative by nature, and can only begin to examine the possibility of identifying patterns both in individual groups and across the two categories.

## Methodology

In order to understand the digital communication patterns within the Christian groups, we base our study on recent methodological approaches to the study of digital texts, such as Netvizz and io, to retrieve Facebook and website data, respectively. We combine computational data collection methods with qualitative text analyses to compare communication styles across both websites and Facebook groups. The data material consists of texts on both majority and minority Christian communities retrieved from websites and social media. The primary data material was collected as a follow-up pilot study to the previous projects of mapping religious communities in Denmark from the Centre for Contemporary Religion, Aarhus University, specifically material from the project "Religion in Aarhus 2013" (Ahlin, Fibiger, Jacobsen, & Nielsen, 2013). This research project consisted of identifying all religious communities in Aarhus, followed by interviews and participant observation, and focused on documenting transformations of religion in a comparison with a similar project ten years previously (Fibiger 2004; Ahlin et al., 2012). Questions were included about which digital media platforms were in use among the religious communities, but this data was not analyzed. In this article, therefore, previous research projects linked to analyzing transformations of religion are utilized as a basis for furthering the research agenda concerning digital media and religion. At the same time, the large mapping project provides necessary background information not only for the selection of

religious communities, but also for identifying key elements of their structure, religious identity and practices (Nielsen, 2018).

As the project focuses on the way in which Christian groups communicate about themselves on websites and Facebook, there are important concerns for the religious privacy of such groups and individuals. Consequently, the study has been designed to collect online data in a reliable and ethical way. Building on the mapping project, we identified five congregations within the ELCD and five free churches. Importantly, these churches represent a variety of Christian denominations, but one decisive criterion for selecting each church was that they had both a website and a Facebook page. For this study, it was important that each church was present online as an institution, because the fundamental comparison in the analysis involves looking across web communication and Facebook to identify patterns between and across these platforms. However, as many of the churches do not have both a Facebook page and a website, this requirement limited the data sample.

Furthermore, the focus was not on the individual pastor or other people connected to the church, or on their presence online as representatives of the organization. As the study asks questions about communication patterns and expression of religious organizations online, we chose to look only at organizational communication online. In other words, we did not interview church representatives about their communicative practices or analyze the historical processes leading up to the establishment of a Facebook page or a website. This means that we have not examined the questions of representation in relation to the question of the elite versus lay members, for instance. And we only have access to conflicts or divergences if such debates surface on the active parts of the institutional media platforms analyzed in this article. This is a particular way of framing a mediatization study, because it highlights the institutional practices of communication rather than individuals' rationalizations for particular ways of communicating, which has been studied elsewhere (Radde-Antweiler, Grünenthal and Gogolok, 2018).

As other studies have demonstrated, individuals often do not view themselves as media users when asked in research interviews (Ibid.), which means that important aspects of practice become invisible to the researcher. And whereas church representatives might feel a push to communicate through new media such as Facebook because of mediatization as a metaprocess in society, whether and how they do this might be rationalized in a number of ways in interviews (Ibid.). So for the purpose of this study, we decided on a different strategy involving analyzing actual examples of communication by churches, revealing how they communicated with their congregations in everyday practice. This enabled us to trace communicative patterns and discuss how they reflected digital media logics depending on the medium in question (website or Facebook).

## Data collection

We used io to create a webscraper that gleaned both text and images from websites, and Netvizz to collect data from Facebook. Both software tools scrape online data without the knowledge or active participation of the subjects being investigated; so what these tools do is to produce *observational data* (Rieder, 2013). Furthermore, both io and Netvizz were developed to collect online data, thereby giving access to more aspects of data and also more analytical aspects of data such as text, images, and statistical data (Rieder, 2013). Since we collected data using software tools such as io and Netvizz, we analyze this data both manually in its digital context as well as structurally in the data files generated through the software programs. We acknowledge that different visualizations and contextualizations may provide different insights into the data (Markham, 2013), so we attempt to consider individual contexts as well as patterns emerging across contexts.

As can be seen in Table 1, the congregations involved were established in their local context at different times. Although they might represent church traditions with a much longer history stretching back through the Middle Ages to the earliest centuries of Christianity, as is the case with the Roman Catholic Church, or church traditions primarily established in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, we focus here on their local establishment in their current context, that is Aarhus. They represent various Christian traditions, but are predominantly variations of Protestant Christianity, with the Roman Catholic Church as the only exception. At the same time, there is a good deal of variation within the broad Protestant field, including a Pentecostal congregation (Citykirken) as well as representatives of international independent church traditions such as Adventists and the Salvation Army (Nielsen, 2018). There are many distinct elements to each tradition which have not been included in this explorative study, and instead the study focuses on analyzing how they communicate as institutions on websites and Facebook, and then raising questions concerning more in-depth studies of how the distinct traits of religious communities can be analyzed in relation to the way they present themselves online.

All the data was collected in September 2016, but it included all the historical data from the Facebook pages. With regard to the websites, the material was scraped somewhat more selectively, singling out particular areas of the webpages. We actively scraped areas labeled 'about us', 'about the church', 'what we believe in', 'history of the church', or similar pages that refer to the way churches communicate as institutions with specific beliefs, traditions, organizational values and congregational activities. This enabled us to focus on the specific segments of the digital media platform set aside for communication as an institution. In the case of Facebook, this means a segment constructed by that specific platform for users; and in the case of the websites it is dependent on the structure of the site. We decided on this approach in order to ensure the possibility of comparison across groups and platforms.

Furthermore, scraping data means that data is represented in a rather different format than when it is presented on a website. For instance, if we had scraped entire webpages,

the communicative patterns might not be very distinctive, since it would be difficult to see patterns in decontextualized parts of the website. Therefore, we decided to scrape specific parts of the website relating specifically to institutional aspects of faith, religious beliefs, and practice. Our theoretically motivated research question therefore had direct implications for which parts of the website we scraped, shaping the data set to specifically address our research question. As we describe below in the section on analytical strategy, we also consciously contextualized our data sets by analyzing them individually and in relation to the wider communicative construct of the website and Facebook pages.

ELCD parishes			
Name	Members	Membership, % of population	Year
Sankt Lukaskirken	8 223	79%	1926
Sankt Markuskirken	6 474	73%	1935
Sankt Johanneskirken	8 955	77 %	1905
Vor Frue Kirke	10 576	78 %	Middle ages
Helligåndskirken	4 597	51 %	1984

Free churches:		
Name	Members	Year
Adventist Church Aarhus	90	1896
City Kirken	400	2010
Saralystkirken	70	2005
Den Katolske Kirke, Aarhus	3272	1880
Salvation Army Aarhus	35	1890

Table 1 and table 2: Overview of churches in the study.

## Data analysis

We performed qualitative content analysis on the data. In the research process, we moved between a directed and a conventional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) – beginning with a theoretically motivated research question and expecting to see differences in communication patterns based on the form of digital media platform on which communication was taking place. However, throughout the study we also critically examined our expectations and developed codes derived from the data on the differences (or the lack of differences) in communication on websites and Facebook, respectively. The important advantage of doing qualitative content analysis is that data can be evaluated as part of the specific data set – for instance, we looked at communicative patterns in specific sections of websites such as ‘about us’, but we also made the analytical move to look at patterns in the context of the overall websites.

Contextualization also has implications for the analysis, because where scraping a website might lead to the decontextualization of elements and a stronger analytical perspective on parts of a website that has been scraped, we re-contextualized these parts through comparisons to the websites as they appear online, and to the wider Facebook pages of the congregation. Consequently, initially codes were developed based on articulations such as ‘we believe’, ‘we do’ or ‘the Bible is or means’. More conventionally developed codes came from images or the lack of iterations of expected codes. For instance,

we encountered an absence of communication of faith and religious meaning and beliefs on many ELDC websites, where the focus was on the church building or artworks in the church. This led to the use of codes such as 'history of the church building', 'history of the church as faith-based community', 'history of the congregation' to distinguish between different aspects of history and understand what they each meant in the specific context of the website and in relation to the specific church and its communication.

## Ethics

The discussions concerning the ethical guidelines for studies involving the internet and social media are subject to rapid development, and struggle to keep up with the pace of technological developments. At the same time, the study of religion also poses some key ethical challenges, especially in relation to the protection of information about individual religiosity and affiliation.<sup>2</sup> The national research committees in Norway have developed research ethical guidelines for internet studies, emphasizing that publicly available material in open fora is also openly available to the researcher, without individual consent. At the same time, each research project must consider whether the user of a Facebook page might regard Facebook as a more closed or private forum than researchers (NESH, 2014 4). Both Netvizz and the io crawler leave a notification on the pages which are crawled for data, so the churches and Facebook were notified electronically about our presence and data collection. However, notifying Facebook does not automatically mean that Facebook groups are also notified. As it turned out, Facebook was the most limited source of data – so owing to its limited analytical potential we decided against taking further steps to notify the Facebook groups. One specific issue of privacy is the use of images on websites and Facebook, as readers of this article might recognize any of the active Facebook participants. We have only reproduced images which were part of an open domain, accessible to anyone visiting the sites. We have not identified any people on these images in the research process.

Another key discussion within the field of internet ethics is the issue of the visibility of the researcher, especially in relation to social media, membership of groups, active participation and openness about observer role (Jacobsen, 2016). We did not participate in the Facebook groups or in the offline church meetings. In this way we tried not to generate interactivity when it did not occur organically; and we also decided against further interactivity between the churches and us, since we were only interested in digital organizational communication. Since religious identification and belonging is a deeply personal matter and an issue we as researchers are concerned to protect, we anonymized all individuals in the analysis of data and in the process of publication. In this research project, our interest has not been on the individual level, but on the organizational communication of religious communities. Consequently, when individuals took part in debates, we refrained from revealing identities and we do not use direct quotations in the article either.

## Findings

Digital media represent a variety of communication forms and therefore also different affordances (Jensen, 2010). In this project we focus on Facebook and websites, because these are the tools used most frequently by the Danish Christian communities. Whereas social media such as Facebook have been conceptualized as connected (Dijck, 2013) and interactive (Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013), and representative of a phatic culture (Miller, 2008), the same cannot be said of websites. Websites can encompass interactive aspects, but in general they are considered 'rhetorical instruments' (Lemke, 1999) and discursive spaces for identity presentation representing 'a communicative, public endeavor' (Schau & Gilly, 2003, 391).

And while perspectives on the mediatization of religion have argued that media take away authority from religious institutions and reframe what religion is and how it can be defined (Hjarvard & Lövheim, 2013), we propose that religious communities try to remedy this process by developing their own mediated religious spaces. Consequently, we base our comments on for example van Es, Van Geenen and Boeschoten, who argue that digital media are made up of a plurality of spaces governed by different gatekeepers and practices (2014). We suggest that not just the media forms but also the gatekeepers and organizations behind the profiles actively shape and direct communication – particularly with regard to the communication of congregational and denominational online identity.

### *Websites – institutional home*

The analysis below has been divided into media types (Facebook compared to organizational websites) used in a variety of ELCD parishes and free churches.

For the purpose of comparison between the websites, we use the website section 'About us' as an exemplary section. This section can encompass a range of topics such as history, art and architecture, values specific to the church, financial aspects and donations, international and faith-based relationships to other organizations, demographic composition of the parish, and activities. The reason for comparing this particular section of the websites is that it is the only section to occur on all the websites considered here. Furthermore, even when the churches use this section for a variety of statements about themselves, we have developed this variety analytically to demonstrate that different issues hold importance for different churches.

*Images:* One clear difference is the use of images on the webpages. Three free churches stand out when compared to the others: Citykirken, Saralystkirken, and the Salvation Army all has images of people on their webpage. The Catholic Church in Denmark also has a couple of images of people, but these are all illustrations of specific sacraments such as baptism or communion.

For Citykirken, Saralystkirken, and the Salvation Army, the images of people are not just illustrations. Instead, they seem to be members of the congregation engaged in worship or community activities, or simply just gathered around a crucifix, or images of



## HISTORIE

Citykirken er en sammenlægning af tre kirker i Aarhus, og blev indviet i januar 2010. Vi drømmer om en kirke der, med det oprindelige kristne budskab fra det første århundrede, er relevant i det 21. århundrede – også for din hverdag. Læs mere om kirken og vores tanker og drømme under "Hvad vil vi?".

Vi er en kirke for alle aldersgrupper som holder gudstjenester søndag formiddag og børnekirke de fleste søndage men vi har mange andre aktiviteter igennem ugens løb. Blandt andet er der samlinger for seniorer, teenagere og de unge. Du kan læse mere under "Gudstjenester" og "For alle aldre" i bjælken foroven.

Hvis du har et ønske om at blive en del af vores spændende kirke, eller hvis du bare er nysgerrig for at se hvem vi er, så kom forbi kirken til gudstjeneste søndag formiddag kl. 10:30 eller til nogen af vores andre spændende arrangementer.

*Figure 1: From the website of Citykirken.*

people representing the congregation arranged professionally for the direct purpose of presenting them to the viewer. It is characteristic of these images that the people concerned are generally looking directly into the camera and therefore seem to be looking at the spectator; they are smiling and approachable. For both Citykirken and Saralystkirken, the texts related to the images emphasize that the communities are fairly recently established, and underscore that they see themselves as a Christian community for contemporary everyday life. Interestingly, these congregations seem to be represented by young people, and they also incorporate a good number of dynamic elements and multimedia such as links to YouTube sermons and other video material.

The Salvation Army is somewhat different because their website is less dynamic. They do have some images under some headings such as membership, but these images are often collected under a specific link such as their 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary or prayer meetings. As a result, the images are a little hard to find, forcing the visitor to dig deeper into the material on the website. The images on the Salvation Army's webpage therefore have a more private character and seem to have been placed on the webpage for the benefit of the congregation as a reminder of shared events and community spirit.

The ELCD parish churches and to some degree the Catholic Church also employ images on their webpages, but sometimes there are no images under the heading 'about us', and the only images that can be seen depict the church building from the outside and inside. One ELCD parish church (Helligåndskirken) only has a single image of a nativity scene. In other words, for the ELCD churches the visual presentation of the members of the community is not a priority, and instead the church as a material space and institution is used to communicate a sense of community visually. Skt. Markus is an illustrative example, with the focal images portraying the church building; furniture such as the

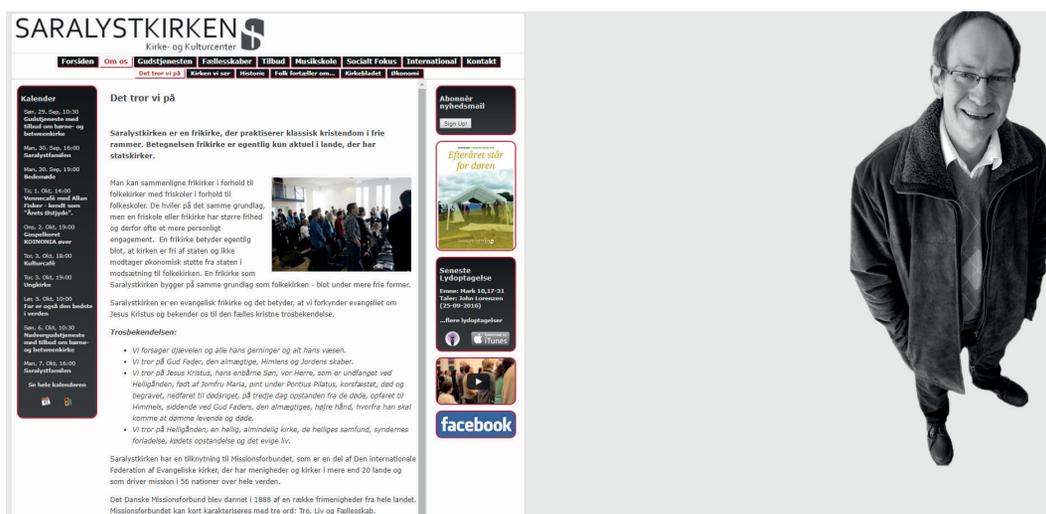


Figure 2: From the website of Saralystkirken.

baptistry, art, and architecture take center stage. Since the data collection, however, the website has been undergoing changes and the key site, 'About Skt Markus Kirke' is no longer available but under reconstruction.

At the same time, it is clear that there is no absolute distinction between the ELCD parish churches and the free churches when it comes to the pictorial communication of their institution, practices and faith. Instead there is a continuum, with a pattern particular to the ELCD parish churches and the free churches emerging. At the same time, however, some parishes and free churches show similarities. For example, the younger churches have a tendency to use images of their congregations engaged in congregational activities, as well as using professional images of congregational members looking directly at the user of the website and integrating a good number of dynamic elements. Churches with a longer history focus more on institutional aspects such as their buildings and art. Whereas the ELCD parish churches primarily show pictures of art and church interiors in connection with discussions of art and artists, the free churches do not do the same. For example, the Salvation Army also shows images of church interiors, but these images are not discussed as art or architecture – instead, they are linked to confessional identity markers, with the seating around the altar being presented as “the mercy seat” and discussed because of its centrality to the practice of the Sunday service.

An initial interpretation of this pattern is that these visual differences reflect differences in the history of the religious communities, with the younger churches focusing on the communication of interpersonal outreach and low institutional hierarchies, while the older churches focus on their traditions and institutional roots. In other words, these pictorial differences cannot be categorized as belonging to free churches or ELCD parishes respec-

tively, nor do they depend on confessional traditions. Instead, they seem to reflect the ages of the churches, their historical foundations, and their long-established congregations.

*Text:* Some of the ELCD parish churches communicate very little in general in terms of denominational values. For example, the presentation of Skt. Markus is primarily focused on the church building, however, there is no mention of beliefs or values. The significant exception here is Helligåndskirken. This ELCD parish church seems to operate within a different organizational communication paradigm, which includes their business plan, a large user survey, and a short explanation of their values, which include light, life, and presence. (Helligåndskirken, 2018, Helligåndskirkens Politikker. Retrieved from: <https://www.helligaandskirken.dk/om-kirken/helligaandskirkens-politikker/> 30/09/2019)

The free churches are more specific than the ELCD churches with regard to their confessional values, which are outlined in different ways, see for example Fig. 2. The free churches feel a need to explain both their status as free churches and what a free church is, as well as expressing their visions, values, and messages very explicitly. Furthermore, the free churches are careful to outline that 'the church' means more to them than a building; it also means spiritual belonging and community under the guidance of Jesus. As such, the free churches communicate more clearly about their Christian identity in relation to questions of faith than the ELCD parishes, where the focus is primarily on art and architecture and the history of the church building itself.

The textual elements therefore mirror the pattern seen in the analysis of the images. Thus, when it comes to the textual explication of confessional values, we find clear distinctions between the ELCD parish churches and the free churches. These findings are of specific relevance in relation to the question of identity expression online, in that they seem to indicate that ELCD parishes belong to a large, national church, with strong ties to culture and society, and therefore do not feel a need to express a specific Christian confessional identity. For example, it is not necessary to underscore a specific Lutheran identity or explicitly express questions of faith. This is in line with the findings of the small-scale study of the national website, where the confessional identity is also downplayed, and the link to the general cultural and societal dimensions of the ELCD is dominant (Nielsen, 2012). The same does not apply to the free churches: they prioritize and focus on stating and explaining their specific religious identity and confessional denomination, as well as their religious histories and organizational development.

### ***Facebook – parish calendar***

Whereas the assumption at the outset of this research project was that the organizations studied here would take the opportunities granted through social media such as Facebook to reach out and communicate directly with their parishioners (Johns, 2012), as has previously been demonstrated (Lomborg & Ess, 2012), this was only the case at first glance. The religious groups in this study had been selected because they had an active

Facebook group, but their activity was very limited, and it turned out that Facebook groups were mostly used as event calendars.

In terms of general activity, two churches stand out: The Salvation Army and the Catholic Church. The Salvation Army has a very high level of activity. The Facebook group is a place to make announcements and share news, remind followers about activities in the church, and share news clips in which the Salvation Army is mentioned. Faith-based issues relating to identity and the communication of values are not explicitly debated, and the activity in the Facebook group is mostly one way, from the church to the members. Interactivity is limited to views of posts, a couple of likes and sometimes a comment or two on a post. Furthermore, the same people make the majority of the comments, and interactivity is mainly driven by these few people. Their role in the congregation is unclear, but their activity rarely inspires other members to participate. The exception is posts about Christmas Charity, where there is a little more interactivity relating to when donations will be made to receivers and when the deadline is to apply. The high level of activity here is linked primarily to the outreach activities of the Salvation Army, which is a core part of this community. But the issues discussed do not address questions of faith – instead, the focus is on informative status updates regarding events and practicalities.

The Catholic Church is also quite active and seems to take an activist stance when it comes to charitable causes such as refugees in Denmark and abroad. As a result, the indirect communication of faith-based values is more prolific on the Catholic Church page. An example could be the post for a cancelled event which was intended to raise money for refugees throughout the world (Katolsk Vor Frue Kirke, Århus, 2016, Facebook post, retrieved from: <https://www.facebook.com/Katolskvorfrue/posts/1083855425003306>, 30/09/2019).

The Catholic Church also posts religious imagery, quotes from the Bible, and images of religious art related to the scripture of the week as part of its communication on Facebook. These quotes and images are not followed by explanations or any interpretation of the quotes, leaving the impression that this communication is intended for a defined group with a prior understanding of the religious framework involved. Compared to the website, the quotes on Facebook therefore seem inspirational, rather than being explanatory or tutorial, because there is no elaboration on how to interpret the quotes or images. However, the interaction is very limited, relating primarily to cultural events, with some users recommending participation based on their previous experiences.

## Discussion and conclusion

Based on an analysis of the digital communication of five Christian ELCD parishes and five free Christian churches in Denmark, we argue that the mediatization of religious communication has yet to make a strong impact on these churches. While there was an impetus to be present in digital media, there seems to be either little understanding of the affordances made available by digital media, or no inclination to be swept up by digital media

logics. Whereas communication patterns on webpages differ in small ways, the amount of communication on Facebook is so limited that it is hard to claim any wider implications of such Facebook activities. The free churches mainly use their webpages to communicate identity and faith, whereas Facebook is used for community outreach in the form of an interactive calendar.

Consequently, returning to the questions of how mediatization influences religious institutions' organizational communication with the congregation and wider world, we argue that these churches have only been influenced by these trends in their online communication to a very low degree – they are present in the digital media, but the impact of the digital media on them is negligible.

Firstly, with regard to the webpages we observed clear communication patterns depending on whether the churches concerned were ELCD or free churches. The ELCD parish churches focus on their history and present their buildings, whereas the free churches emphasize their religious identity, faith message and practices. Here the major difference was reflected in the ways in which values and identities were communicated in images and texts about the churches. And the younger free churches also use more recent media elements, e.g. more dynamic elements. In other words, these issues do not seem to be particularly influenced by forces of mediatization, but mainly reflect organizational aspects. One very simple explanation of why mediatization has yet to influence religious communication on webpages is that all of these webpages were constructed at a specific time before digital communication styles were established. The webpages seem to mimic more traditional forms of communication such as printed histories of the church building or printed newsletters to the congregation. Therefore, the webpages are updated and maintained within this paradigm rather than being transformed in the light of more recent digital communication practices that could lead to a mediatization process towards the mainstreaming of religious communication in digital media. In other words, the churches studied here tend to transfer their customary communicative practices from an analog to a digital platform instead of fundamentally digitalizing the way they communicate. Based on this study, we can only speculate as to the reason for this lack of adaptation, since this study only investigates patterns of communication and not the reasons behind these communicative practices. However, it seems reasonable to suggest that there is a certain lack of motivation to update a well-functioning website.

Secondly, on Facebook we observed a very fragmented practice of communication. Whereas the Salvation Army and the Catholic Church use their Facebook pages to announce their outreach activities, these are primarily aimed at members of the congregation and there is very little in terms of defining identity and values in a direct way to try to communicate religious dogmas or identity. Facebook seems to be used primarily as a relatively easy and direct channel for information about outreach activities, for communicating with existing members. So whereas other studies have found a tendency to mainstream through media forms, this study can only partially confirm this tendency. There

is considerable organizational communication through websites; but the ELCD churches in particular forfeit the opportunity to communicate their Christian identity and values (Schau & Gilly, 2003) in favor of the more traditional communication of art and architecture, and in some cases also history and organizational policies. So the potential of media to shape religious communication seems to be reduced down by the institutional practices of communicating in limited ways online, and by a lack of initiatives in terms of changing websites more radically once they have been built. Part of the explanation for this relates to the way websites are established and maintained: they are generally constructed as the result of a single effort and then maintained when deemed necessary by those in charge. For the ELCD churches, the parish council concerned links its digital communication work to the work that it does – so the efforts made depend on the priority allocated to online communication. Changes in web communication only occur very slowly, and fixed pages are hardly ever changed. This means that mediatization processes are not as visible as one might expect based on previous studies of religion and mediatization, where changes in media had profound influences on how religion was communicated and addressed in public (Christensen, 2012; Hjarvard, 2012; Hjarvard & Lövheim, 2013). In other words, the churches in this study still seem to be working in a traditional communication paradigm with little influence of digital mediatization.

The picture with regard to Facebook is also less clear than previous research suggests. Whereas other studies have found that social media serve as organizing spaces for religious groups (Johns, 2012; Lomborg & Ess, 2012), this was less true in this study. All the groups studied here had a Facebook page, but these were not necessarily used as an actual organizing space. Only two of the free church groups (the Salvation Army and the Catholic Church) used their Facebook group as anything other than a calendar. Furthermore, even when such Facebook groups were very active, the communication was mainly unidirectional, that is from church to congregation. The congregation and the general public were mostly silent. Consequently, this study of Facebook groups and web pages offers little empirical evidence to understand mediatization processes concerning religious diversity and mainstreaming, as these processes were not very pronounced or observable in the digital media used by the Christian organizations we have studied. However, as a channel for outreach and as a calendar, Facebook groups seem to function as an extension of the physical institution rather than an interactive space in which religious identity is debated or reframed. However, this may be connected to the data set, because we only investigated established church groups. We conclude that although the churches involved in this study use digital media for the purpose of communication, there is very little evidence of mediatization processes influencing the communication that they produce, and no evidence that Christian groups adopt the logic of the digital media. For example, we see no examples of connectivity (Dijck, 2013) between the webpages and Facebook groups, we only detect very limited examples of interactivity (Jenkins, 2006, Jenkins et al., 2013), and we do not really see any examples of phatic culture (Miller, 2008)

in these groups. The inevitable conclusion is that mediatization processes seem to be occurring at a slow pace and with little impact on the actual organizational communication of Christian groups.

As this study has limited itself to only examining the institutional online communication of selected groups, the question of increased individualization and interactivity on other levels of religious communities is not addressed, nor is the question of other contexts, digital or non-digital, which may be driven by more informal activities in the congregations. Here, we can only conclude based on the institutional communication platforms connected directly to the formal structures of the religious communities. This also raises an important question in relation to the study of contemporary religion, where the focus on the lived religion of individuals has meant (to some extent) that interest in the development of traditional religious institutions has been limited. Our modest study indicates that a study of the institutional communication of religious organizations is an important element in the study of the overall dynamics of the transformation of contemporary religion.

The study did find some support for the claim that religious organizations maintain their religious profile when using media, and are therefore not just mainstreamed by digital mediatization processes. The influence of the digital media did not appear to mainstream the underlying identities and areas of interest of the groups, and we did not find a new, common mainstream expression of religious identity shaped by the rules of digital media contexts in this material (Hjarvard, 2008; Lövheim, 2014). This seems to indicate that the gatekeepers and organizations governing the spaces influence the extent to which digital spaces are allowed to play out their affordances (van Es, Van Geenen and Boeschoten, 2014). And we therefore argue that not just the media forms but also the gatekeepers and organizations behind the profiles actively shape and direct communication, particularly in relation to the communication of congregational identity. In order to elaborate on these exploratory conclusions, we suggest investigating this issue further, for example through interviews based on a variety of data types to develop more perspectives on Christian organizational communication. Furthermore, we suggest exploring the many aspects of online communication by religious organizations that have not been included in this study, for example emails concerning communication plans or other types of meta-communication on organizational communication.

Finally, this study raises a series of questions for future studies concerning expressions of religious identity. This explorative study has shown that there are indeed different patterns in the way that majority and minority religions in Denmark today communicate digitally. But these differences are not absolute, and similarities exist between specific ELCD parishes and free churches. In addition, in order to further explore the initial findings of this study, it is of course necessary to include a much larger sample of Christian groups. And this leads to consideration of the research design applied here, which could be developed to include other religious traditions, and also the broader field of new-age

religious expressions. This study has therefore only begun to scratch the surface of the way in which religious organizations communicate online.

## Notes

1. In this article the Danish National Church (Folkekirken) will be referred to by its official English name: The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark (ELCD).
2. See for example § 7, the Danish Personal Data Protection Act <https://www.retsinformation.dk/forms/r0710.aspx?id=828>

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Gry Høngsmark Knudsen  
Associate professor  
Department of Marketing & Management  
University of Southern Denmark  
and Director of Research for Business and Tech,  
University College Lillebælt

Marie Vejrup Nielsen  
Associate professor  
School of Culture and Society  
Department of the Study of Religion  
Aarhus University