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## How Religion Becomes Visible: Old Believer Communities in Social Media

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*The article discusses how Old Believers create a space of new visibility for their religion in social media. The author analyzes online and of-line practices as complementing each other, examining the Facebook pages of those communities and settlements in which anthropological fieldwork was previously conducted (the Northwestern Black Sea region). Based on Heidi Campbell's theoretical approaches and using materials from online observations and field research as sources, the author analyzes two approaches of Old Believer self-representation in social media: 1) a digital narrative created on behalf of the religious community that is institutionally encouraged and an authorized way to make religion visible in public space, 2) and a digital narrative about the community's everyday life and Old Believers' lived religion. Despite all the differences, in both cases visible religion is being constructed online for both internal and external users.*

**Keywords:** mediatization of religion, social media, visible religion, digital narrative of a religious community, lived religion, Old Believers.

ONE of the consequences of the mediatization of religion is its increased visibility in the public space. Nowadays, a social media user can not only learn more about this or that Old Believer

community but can even “step into” a church through numerous photographs and videos of sermons available online. Typically, Old Belief churches prohibit filming during services (it is however possible with the priest’s blessing), and members of other denominations are only allowed to witness the service from the parvis. This latter rule was institutionally formalized by a decree of the Metropolitan Council of the Russian Orthodox Old-Rite Church (ROORC) from February 2015, which states: “We request non-Old Believers to stay in the narthex for the entire duration of the service, to refrain from entering the temple, venerating the icons, and performing any visible prayer rituals.” In many cases, more visual information can be found on social media than standing on the parvis.

Two interconnected questions expectedly arise in this context: (1) how representatives of religious communities ensure their group’s presence in social media, giving it more visibility in the public space, and (2) what effect this increase in visibility has on these religious communities.

There have been numerous studies on the impact of the Internet on religious practices by English speaking experts (Dixon 1997; Houston 1998; Dawson 2001; Babin and Zukowski 2002; Young 2004; Herring 2005; Laney 2005). They focus on various aspects of the perception of Internet technologies and consider the Internet as a context for creating communities. Multiple empirical studies into online Christian practices have been conducted. Heidi Campbell and Paul Teusner reviewed these works in detail in a chapter of a monograph on Christian reflections on virtual life (Campbell and Teusner 2011). The study of post-Soviet interconnections between religion and media has generated a few works as well. In particular, an issue of the online journal *Digital Icons* was dedicated to digital Orthodoxy in Russia, including the official position of the Russian Orthodox Church on the Internet, religious practices using digital technologies, and forms of self-expression in digital media (Strukov 2015). It is also worth mentioning E. Grishaeva and V. Shumkova who have been studying online practices of Christian communities (Grishaeva and Shumkova 2018).

To date, there is no scholarship on the uses of the Internet and social media in Old Believer communities. At the same time, this area is of interest because it encompasses several relevant problems, among which are the emergence of new everyday practices in religious communities, the understanding of these practices, and the interaction of conventional behavioral patterns with technological innovations, the search for new methods of inclusion in a community, strategies for ensuring the presence of religion in the public space, and, expectedly, the changes that modern technology and its usage cause in religious com-

munities themselves. The fact that very diverse opinions on the use of the Internet and social media exist among Old Believers—from full or selective acceptance to motivated rejection—makes the exploration of this range of issues even more interesting.

### **Methodological approaches**

Analysis of the manner in which religion is represented in social media and the impact that the use of media technologies and public visibility have on these communities is based on materials from online observations, anthropological fieldwork, and interviews of Old Believers in Moldova and Romania recorded during expeditions between 2008 and 2019. In this paper, I analyze online pages of the communities and settlements, in which I previously conducted field research. Ethnographic observations allow the scholar to understand what goes on online and make it possible both to differentiate between participants of online communication and to understand the broader context of the interaction. Rather than contrasting between offline and online practices, this approach allows scholars to analyze them as complementary practices that function in different contexts (Georgalou 2017; Yus 2011). Moving away from strict differentiation of online and offline practices is motivated by the impossibility to distinguish between them due to their close ties in daily life. For example, one could conduct a church service and post its video recording on a Facebook page. There are numerous variations among the further usage of this video: it can be watched by parishioners who missed the service or by those who were there and want to rewatch it. This example shows that certain posts and webpages can be considered an extension of religious practices.

I base my analysis of how Old Believers ensure the presence of their faith on social media on Heidi Campbell's theoretical frameworks. In her studies on the usages of social media by various congregations she calls for paying attention not only to religious tradition (in this case it would be the Old Belief or, more specifically, the traditions of the Belokrinsky Old Believers) but also to practices among specific groups (e.g., among the Belokrinsky Old Believers in Chisinau) (Campbell 2010, 20). Campbell pointed out that approaches and objectives for using social media can vary in communities within one religious tradition depending on a range of factors, such as how they determine the boundaries of the community or their perspective on religious leaders and text media (Campbell 2010, 15). The scholar offered her own approach to examining the engagement of religious communities with

new media, the Religious-Social Shaping of Technology (RSST). This approach incorporates the reactions of representatives of religious communities to media technologies and the beliefs and concepts that influence their choices. If the perception of a technology in a community is influenced by religious and sociocultural factors, the community itself is shaped by the influence of the media technology. To address the questions of how a community forms responses to new media technologies, Campbell suggests exploring the history, traditions, beliefs and concepts, discourses, and the process of negotiation and assessment within a community (Campbell 2010).

I explore several Old Believers' positions, concerns, and the process of creating norms for engaging with social media using decrees of Councils, information on church activities, observations, interviews of the Belokrinitsky and Novozybkovsky Old Believer communities in Moldova and Romania, and data from online observation of what Old Believers from the same regions post on their social media accounts.

Ethically, I adhered to certain important principles. During oral interviews, some of my interlocutors expressed a desire to stay anonymous, thus their identification will be withheld from the paper. In these cases, I disclose only the region and omit the name of the specific settlement. The absence of established ethical guidelines for online observations, in my opinion, calls for discussions of solutions for potential problems in each individual case. In this paper, I analyze in detail only those open-access community accounts on social media, whose objective is to inform a wider audience about their culture and religion. The matter of whether to disclose the names of people who post on these open-access sources was settled in favor of open data, as relevant comments are made in the public space, and as the oral interviews and online observations led me to conclude that the participants of online communication are aware of this publicity.<sup>1</sup>

### **Attitude toward the Internet: the official position of ROORC**

Digital media functions as one of the current channels of missionary activity. The presence of religion online is thus endorsed institutionally.

Matters of using the Internet have been discussed in recent years at Moscow Metropolitan Councils of the Russian Orthodox Old-Rite

1. Apropos, the recommendations on bibliographic descriptions and citation rules developed at the School of Cultural Studies at the Higher School of Economics: [https://culture.hse.ru/standart\\_bibliograf\\_opisanija](https://culture.hse.ru/standart_bibliograf_opisanija).

Church. The texts of ROORC decrees on communications and the publication of the 2011 Council show an interest in new media. For example, a decision was made to “broaden the utilization of possibilities of modern information resources for preaching salvation” (ROORC Council 2011). In 2013, the Council agenda already contained a separate item on the positions on the Internet and its advantages and drawbacks were discussed: “The clergyman pointed out that any given virtual action on social media leaves an indelible trace in monitoring systems and information storage. Thus, in his opinion, people should understand that a person’s behavior online should be even more responsible than in daily life” (ROORC Council 2013 b). The corresponding decree of the Council states: “Christians should be spiritually vigilant while using the Internet” (ROORC Council 2013 a). In 2019, the item “on the actions of Old Believers on the Internet” was discussed and the following decision was made: “To call upon Christians to approach their comments on the Internet and other media responsibly, upholding Christian ethics and bearing in mind that, as the Scripture says, ‘every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgement’” (Matthew 12:36) (ROORC Council 2019). In conjunction with developing an official Church position and discussing acceptable ways of ensuring the presence of Old Belief communities online, a variety of online courses were organized for Old Believers and anyone interested.

In September 2019 the department of education at the ROORC Moscow Metropolis launched an online Sunday school for adults, in which lectures were offered on exegesis (Acts of the Apostles), the Old Testament, the liturgy, and Church Slavonic for anyone who was interested. The recorded lectures were posted on a website (*nashavera.com*), on social media (VKontakte), and on YouTube after the webinars.<sup>2</sup>

The online course “foundations of church journalism” was also organized by the ROORC Moscow Metropolis in 2019. Anyone could attend after filling out a questionnaire and submitting a statement of purpose. The main target audience was active Old Believers who were “planning to learn or already engaged in the media space (managing the parish website, writing news columns, posting comments on social media).”<sup>3</sup> Those in attendance included Old Believers from several regions of Russia and abroad, including Moldova. In lectures on church journalism, it was emphasized that the main goal of religious mass me-

2. More on the course at <http://rpsc.ru/news/mitropoliya/sm-january2020/?fbclid=IwARodjfwkcBCnoISr7KEUUtNBaC2XYAm4e1Bok1XdS3ROWLp4KGS6w1u3H4>.

3. See details on the ROORC website <http://rpsc.ru/news/mitropoliya/journalist-2019/>.

dia was preaching and that it was important to understand precisely what should and should not be said on social media about the Old Belief.

As Campbell showed, official discourses and practices play an important role in forming responses to the challenges of using modern technology. An analysis of the official position of the ROORC on the Internet and online resources allows scholars to discuss the willingness to and the promotion of using social networks in missionary activities. However, there are a variety of opinions on this among Old Believers, including among priests. On the one hand, many clergymen speak against life in isolation and often are active users of social networks and moderators of Old Believer community websites. On the other hand, there are priests in the same region who express negative views on using social networks and on distributing information about the Old Belief on the Internet.

### **Old Believer attitudes toward the Internet: A view from the field**

One of the circumstances that complicates the situation, making it more interesting at the same time, is that representatives of some communities, predominantly rural ones, still perceive the Internet (and social networks) as a negative component of modern life. It is an example of what Campbell, echoing John Ferré, called an approach to media technology as a separate way of cognition, in which religious communities are suspicious of media because they shape the culture and promote values that contradict religious convictions (Campbell 2010). Having studied Old Belief communities in Moldova and Romania since 2008, I came across such views on modern media among Novozybkovsky Old Believers in the village of Sarichioi (Tulcea County, Romania) and among the older generation of Belokrinitsky Old Believers (villages of Cunicea, Egorovca, Dobrogea Veche in the Republic of Moldova, and the city of Bender in the unrecognized Pridnestrovi-an Moldavian Republic) (Gergesova 2019).<sup>4</sup>

Here are two cases to consider:

1. Sarichioi, October 2008. Finishing an interview with a member of a Novozybkovsky community at her home, I asked per-

4. This is not characteristic for all Old Believers in this community. In particular, there is an article on the Old Believers' website ruvera.ru about Old Believers in Irkutsk which says that Novozybkovsky Old Believers "use modern communication technology—watch television, use Internet and cell phones. As the community leader says, 'God gave them, we should use them.'"

mission to take a photograph of my interviewee. She gave her permission and added: “Just don’t put me on Facebook! I know these... I don’t even have Internet on my phone, no Facebook, it’s only to make phone calls. You see—I don’t even have a TV at home, that’s how we live” (female, born 1962, Novozybkovskyy community).

2. Cunicea, August 2017. “Don’t, don’t photograph me!” [Why not? You’d have a picture as a keepsake.] “No-no! I’ve been told what goes on in that Internet! Don’t, I don’t want it, I am scared, it’ll be time for me to die soon, I don’t need this. Forgive me Lord!” A little later my interviewee explained: “This is pride, we are not supposed to” (female, born 1931, Belokrinitsky community).

In the first case the Internet and Facebook appear in the same typological range as television, which is seen among Old Believer communities in the region as “Satan’s eye” or a “manifestation of devilry.” In the second case the Internet is not a neutral platform either, but the motivation is different. It loses neutral status precisely because of the concomitant public visibility. As my interviewee expressed, the desire to be publicly visible is a sin (“this is pride”). The second case becomes even more interesting upon examining earlier field studies. In 2011 the same resident of Cunicea, who refused to be photographed in 2017, permitted photography. One can assume that in this case the danger of being put online raised a restriction and led to an even higher degree of seclusion.

Similar perceptions of the Internet can be found among Old Believers of other regions and communities, for example, the Chasoveny community, whose members “strive to avoid sharing their personal data. They also do their best not to be photographed, let alone appear online” (Gergesova 2019), i.e., their attitude toward new technologies is shaped by attitudes toward technologies which they already know. Danila Rygovsky argues the same for the Chasoveny community. In his field study he encountered anxiety among his respondents caused by the prospect of their personal information or recordings of their interviews being released online (Rygovsky 2019, 20, 38).

Many Old Believers in Moldova and Romania share a conviction that one should limit Internet usage and abstain from posting on social media during fasts and/or religious holidays. It is hard to determine the origins of this restriction, but in this context, it is indicative that the above-mentioned online course on the foundations of church journalism organized by the Moscow Metropolis of ROORC took a break for a fast. Furthermore, representatives of the Russian Ortho-

dox Church also call for restrictions on social media presence during Lent because “social media is a space that devours time” and fasting gives “powerful external support to try to defeat this time eater” (Interfax Religiiia 2020).

Many Moldovan Old Believers come to Moscow at least once in their life, to the Rogozhsky community—a spiritual center for Belokrinitsky Old Believers. Subsequently, norms and regulations that function in the Rogozhsky community become known and in certain cases are transferred by visitors to their own communities (“If it is done this way in Rogozhsky, it is supposed to be this way.”) One of the rules that has been transferred to other communities, including ones abroad, is the ban on photography in the temple, which is justified because “photography expels the holy spirit from the temple.” Thus, constructing a space for their religion on social media using photos would violate this restriction.

Some Old Believer communities in the region do not have webpages at all, but their nonexistence does not mean that all members of a community are against them. A number of rural church parishioners in Moldova are signed up for the Chisinau Old Believer community webpage, which I will discuss further. Respectively, the existence of a community profile on social media does not mean that the majority of parishioners approve of it or are signed up for it (some are simply unaware of its existence).

I will now focus on the ways of presenting the Old Belief on social media that moderators of existing webpages select, consider the similarities and differences of these ways, and discuss how social media participate in shaping communities, their identities, and borders in interdenominational dialogue.

### **The digital narrative of community religious life**

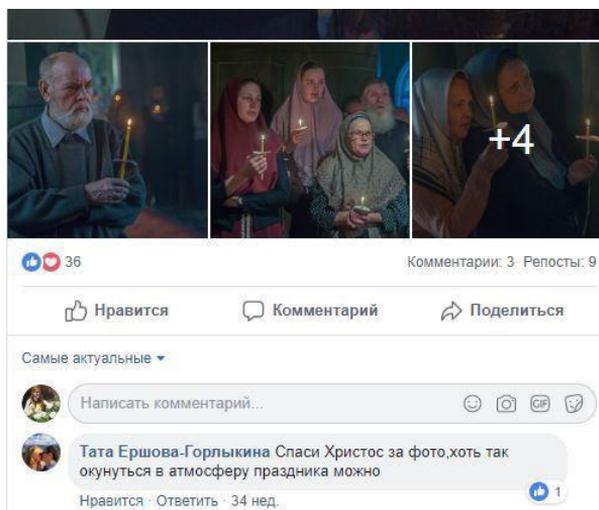
A common way to give a religion visibility on social media is to create an official page or a group for a community. These pages are often moderated by priests and reflect the activities of the church. When a narrative of the church life of a community emerges and exists in the digital sphere, I call it a digital narrative.

Let us look at the Facebook page of the Intercession of the Virgin Mary Old Believer community in Chisinau. The page was created on 9 November 2013 and on 1 October 2019 had 341 followers. Among them are parishioners of the Chisinau church, members of other Old Believer communities in Moldova, scholars of Old Rite culture, and

people who are interested in the community's life. The "About" section lists it as a "group" and provides the name of the community and the address of the church: "Intercession of the Virgin Mary Old Believer community in Chisinau. 3/5 Mazarachi St., Chisinau." Posts by users occupy a separate field that does not appear on the newsfeed (they can be viewed by navigating from the main page to the "posts" section where the "visitors' posts" column is pinned on the side). Posts by the moderator appear at the top of the list and the page is being maintained on behalf of the community.

The page is populated with professional photographs and/or video recordings of services, cross processions, and significant events from the church life of the community. Visual materials prevail but texts appear as well. An important feature of the presentation of the Old Belief online is the ways of talking about religion that differ substantially from formal religious discourse—not sermons but rather "small pieces of text, videos, and links to other online sources have become the currency of social interaction" on many platforms including Facebook (Campbell and Teusner 2011, 65). However, the page in question also offers posts in which the moderator moves toward a traditional discourse of the clergy (e.g., a selection of professional photographs is supplemented with texts for liturgical singing).

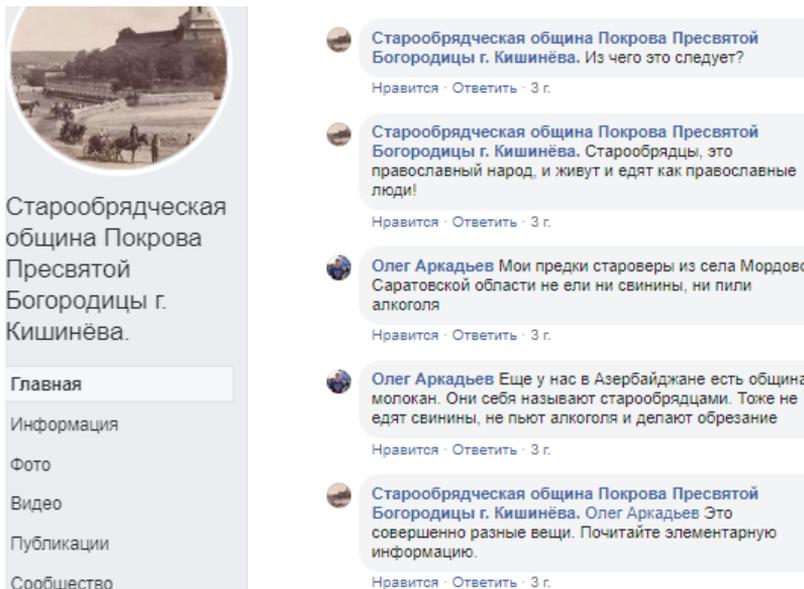
Multimedia data usage creates the effect of co-presence which is supported by comments to posts (see, for example, figure 1).



**Figure 1. Comment to a post on the Facebook page of the Intercession of the Virgin Mary Old Believer community in Chisinau.**

Co-presence becomes important primarily for former parishioners of the church of Intercession of the Virgin Mary (Mazarachi) who left Chisinau and for many Moldovan Old Believers who attend services there periodically.

Public visibility is also constructed by presenting the community on an open-source page, rather than in a group in which the flow of visitors can be controlled.<sup>5</sup> Any Facebook user can visit the page, but the majority of those who like and comment on posts are Old Believers. Members of other denominations do, however, have an opportunity to follow updates and watch videos and photos, including ones taken inside the church. Comments “from the outside” do not receive detailed responses. The following discussion of Old Believers and Molokans provides an illustration (see figure 2).



**Figure 2. Discussion about Old Believers and Molokans on the Facebook page of an Old Believer community in Chisinau.**

Another example is the absence of any reaction from the moderator to a question in a post from April 30, 2016 (“Why do some people have lad-

5. I cannot be certain here that this choice is not predicated by the moderator’s technical skills. Nonetheless, the intent of the moderator is less significant for this study than how the page functions and how it enables visibility of religion in the online space.

der rosaries hanging on their wrists? What does this mean?") In my opinion, this steadfast position of the moderator serves as evidence that even though technically the page is open to everyone, its target audience is primarily Old Believers. Outsiders can observe but their presence inside the community should not be felt, so that the page remains a private space.

The influence of media technology on the community that Campbell discusses is fully traceable in the case of the Chisinau Old Believers' parish, especially if offline and online practices are seen as complementing each other. First, the presence of religion on social media allows former parishioners who cannot attend services after moving to a different town or village to stay integrated in the community. Second, Old Believers from other towns and villages who follow the page and the events in the life of the Chisinau parish are included in the community. Third, one can see how representatives of other denominations or, to be more precise, those who overstep the boundaries of the silent and inconspicuous observer are continuously excluded from interactions. In essence, they have access to the same information as the members of the congregation. The difference is that the latter need no additional explanations.

This kind of construction of a digital narrative on behalf of the Chisinau Old Believer community demonstrates a position similar to that of many clergymen in the region. For example, a priest (of the Belokrinit-skaya hierarchy) I interviewed expressed the following opinion on Old Believers' social media groups/pages: "People who discuss traditions on social media don't know much themselves. Those who know the traditions will stop talking about them. It's people new to the faith who discuss them." During the interview he emphasized that he never explains the peculiarities of Old Belief traditions to anyone online. However, it is important to draw a distinction here between an understanding of acceptable or necessary presence of information about a community online and on social media specifically, even without giving answers to questions from people "new to the faith"—and rejecting the presence of religion in the online space. During a field study in an Old Believer village in the northwestern Black Sea region, I talked to a priest (of the same Belokrinit-skaya hierarchy) who did not approve of his congregation's Facebook page, did not use social media, and considered the information about Old Believer traditions he encountered online to be distorted.

If the online space of a community is visible to all Facebook users and if exclusion, or, more precisely in this case noninclusion, manifests only through refusing to answer clarifying questions, leaders of different Old Believer communities practice other strategies of closing their religious space to adherents of other faiths. Thus, the represen-

tation of a community on the VKontakte social network often appears as a closed group, accessible only to members of the same Old Believer community. For example, there is a closed Pomor community page that people talk about in Novodvinsk (Arkhangelsk region): “Moderators do not accept users who belong to other denominations—everyone who submits a request to join receives a message announcing to which congregation the applicant belongs. Those who try to cheat are quickly identified by the moderator” (Karliner 2016). Whereas Facebook offers several choices—a page (open-access source where moderators have slightly more power to regulate user activity) or a group (there are three types of groups, public, closed, and secret)—VKontakte only offers a choice between public and closed groups.

### Lived religion on a social network

Another way of providing religion a presence in the public space is to discuss on social media the daily life of a village where most inhabitants belong to the same ethno-denominational community. Pages of settlements represent Old Belief as a lived religion through everyday village life. Different strategies are used here to construct an online space, and the absence of community leadership approval of its publications influences the content and its representation.

Let us consider as an example the page of the village of Egorovca in the Moldovan Falesti region. The page was created on January 17, 2011 and by October 1, 2019 had eighty-three followers, mostly current residents of the village and those who had moved to other villages or towns. The “About” section addresses when the village was founded and its location: “Our village Egorovca (founded 1919) is in sunny Moldova, close to the city of Bălți in the Falesti region.”<sup>6</sup> The page is listed in the categories “Sports and Recreation” and “Eastern Orthodox Church.” The history section has texts on the village by Natalia Rozamirina, a reporter from the *AiF-Moldova* newspaper (Chisinau), who lived in Egorovca as a child. Stories about the village are prefaced by the slogan “Let us preserve our native village!” followed by “We look forward to your photos and videos about the life of the

6. The author’s language is preserved in the Romanian style of spelling proper names, see: [https://www.facebook.com/pg/%D1%81%Do%95%Do%B3%Do%BE%D1%80%Do%BE%Do%B2%Do%BA%Do%Bo-%Do%A4%Do%Bo%Do%BB%Do%B5%D1%88%D1%82%D1%81%Do%BA%Do%BE%Do%B3%Do%BE-%D1%80%Do%Bo%Do%B9%Do%BE%Do%BD%Do%Bo-%Do%9C%Do%BE%Do%BB%Do%B4%Do%BE%Do%B2%Do%Bo-178933328814088/about/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/%D1%81%Do%95%Do%B3%Do%BE%D1%80%Do%BE%Do%B2%Do%BA%Do%Bo-%Do%A4%Do%Bo%Do%BB%Do%B5%D1%88%D1%82%D1%81%Do%BA%Do%BE%Do%B3%Do%BE-%D1%80%Do%Bo%Do%B9%Do%BE%Do%BD%Do%Bo-%Do%9C%Do%BE%Do%BB%Do%B4%Do%BE%Do%B2%Do%Bo-178933328814088/about/?ref=page_internal).

Old Believers' village of Egorovca!" The content of this page is open to all Facebook users, but the target audience is residents of Egorovca (moderators and authors of posts often address them).

On the one hand, opening this page one immediately sees a typical self-representation of a small settlement: festivities, season changes, communal work, or the beginning of the school year are newsworthy events. A series of publications is dedicated to the village's centennial (to preparations, the celebration itself, and congratulating residents). The information on the page is offered via typical social media strategies: photographs (beautiful places, pictures of celebrations), atmospheric posts (can be accompanied by a photo and is usually about love for the village), the fact of the day, an article (in most cases, an expanded history), video (typically, ethnographic materials), and posts with poems appear frequently.

On the other hand, the materials on the page provide information on lived religion: photographs allow one to understand how closely religious regulations are followed in the community (for example, regarding church clothes or the way to tie the headscarf), which church feasts are celebrated, how many people attend services, and which memories those who follow the page share. Below are some examples of such posts (see figures 3 and 4).



**Figure 3. Post on the village of Egorovca Facebook page featuring women in headscarves.**

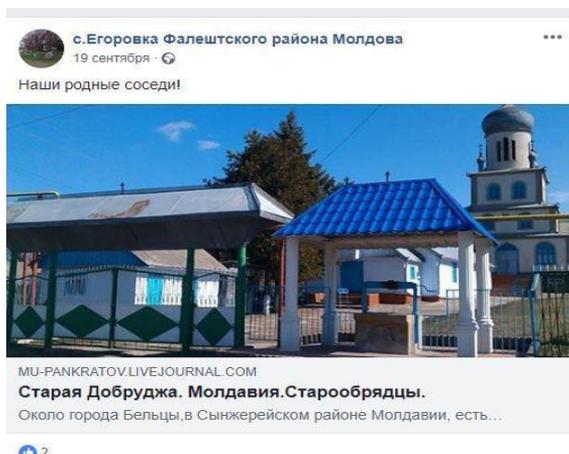


**Figure 4. Post on the village of Egorovca Facebook page featuring a procession of the cross.**

The page moderator inserts Egorovca into the network of Old Believer communities in the region (and of the same Belokrinitsky tradition). In particular, posts about neighbors are almost always about nearby Old Believer villages (see figures 5 and 6) and photographs of sites outside Egorovca are often of churches in other Old Believer communities. The page informs followers about the history, traditions, and events in the communities of the region. Thus, one of the crucial functions of the page is maintaining connections between the community and other Belokrinitsky Old Believers who live in the northwestern Black Sea region.

The daily life narrative of the village includes not only religious topics but also memories of the kolkhoz (see figure 7), stories about bee-keeping, fruit sale advertisements, and so on. The fact that a religious leader does not populate the page exclusively with information about church life or rules of a specific Old Believer tradition, points to the narrative of this page reflecting lived religion.

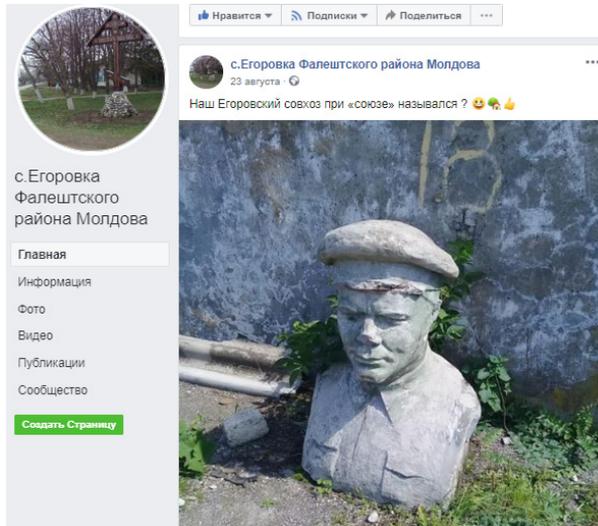
Juxtaposing this digital narrative with the data from a field study in Egorovca, I can indicate that the page offers information about those Old Believer communities, which maintain the closest cultural and economic ties. As for restrictions on using the Internet and social media, I did not detect any notion of them in this particular village.



**Figure 5. Post on the village of Egorovca Facebook page, captioned “Our dear neighbors,” containing a Live Journal article about Old Believers near the town of Balti in the Synzhereisk region of Moldova.**



**Figure 6. Post on the village of Egorovca Facebook page featuring a performance at the village’s centennial by visitors from the village of Pcovrca. Also included is a brief history of Pcovrca and its Old Believer community.**



**Figure 7. Post on the village of Egorovca Facebook page about the Egorovca kolkhoz.**

Based on field data, moderators of neither discussed pages follow the widespread restriction on using the Internet and social media during fasts and/or holy feasts in the region. Photos and videos of important church life events appear on the Chisinau community page on the following day or even the same day. Some of the photographs are posted in the Egorovca community page awhile after a holy feast, but religious and secular holiday greetings are often posted on the day of the celebration, and I noticed no breaks in posting activity during fasts on either discussed page.

## Conclusion

Despite the differences in goals and methods of content presentation, in both cases the presence of the Old Belief online is noticeable not only among the group but also outside its boundaries. In situations where broadcasting religious practices on social media is controlled (as in the Chisinau parish), most Old Believers in the region promote the expansion of practices in the media space. Yet, among more conservative Old Believers, who follow the ban on using social media, placing it in the same typological range as television and other modern technologies, there is no information on the actions of the community to expand online religious practices (for example, conducting a service and posting a video of it on Facebook). However, if present-

ing information about religion via photographs, videos, links, and short texts can be perceived as contrasting with more conventional religious discourse, it performs its functions seamlessly on social media. In the case of representing religion on social media via a digital narrative on daily life, all the above-mentioned types of communications seem quite natural. It can be established that the normalization of the Internet among most Old Believer communities occurs without constructing any specific theological discourse on the issue.

As field studies show, further expansion of the presence of the Old Belief on social media is predictable. Some local community members mentioned in interviews their intention to create relevant pages and groups on social media, but they are faced with an entire range of challenges concerning the boundaries of the constructed online space: how to represent their community online, what to discuss and what to avoid, and how to draw the line between themselves and members of other denominations.

The process of discussing new norms and boundaries of using social media alongside relevant practices of creating community pages and groups also instigate change in the offline sphere. First and foremost, it is tied into the comprehension of a system of boundaries. On the one hand, faced with the threat of being pulled into the public online space, communities develop rules meant to protect them from unwanted publicity (e.g., direct prohibition of being photographed or using social media). Motivations for prohibitions vary from the fear of disapproval or a desire to refrain from prideful behavior to wanting to preserve what Herzfeld called cultural intimacy (Herzfeld 1997). On the other hand, appreciating the new opportunities provided by social media, many members of Old Believer communities find it important to create their own narratives of their culture, breaking established stereotypes or offering information about themselves that serves as a trustworthy source on the Old Belief.

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