

The Texts of the Orthodox Church in Digital Form: Consequences, Challenges, Reflections

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Prologue

As it is well known, the text was the first way of representing information on a computer, given the fact that computers were originally unable to effectively handle audio, images and video, and to this day it remains the dominant one¹. Subsequently, with the new digital conditions, the text has been redefined through the cultural practices of its production and reception, while the assumption concerning the role of the text in communication remains fundamental: the text is the basic unit through which meaning is being negotiated²; therefore, its presence in human life is essential and important. Digital technology has substantially contributed to the process of profoundly modifying the contemporary human beings' relationship with writing, reading, vision, perception, hearing and learning, and –consequently– their relationship with texts.

In the field of humanities and social sciences, texts have been from the beginning at the epicenter of the digital form. The application of digital methods and tools in the humanities has opened up exciting prospects for

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1. The text can range from a single word (e.g. a SLOW sign on the street) to a series of statements or sentences in a speech, a letter, a novel, etc.; see R. Carter and M. McCarthy, *Cambridge Grammar of English*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2006.

2. This is because, when we use language in the production and exchange of our meanings, we communicate with texts (from very short to very long) and not with individual sentences; see M. A. K. Halliday & J. R. Martin, *Writing Science: Literacy and Discursive Power*, The Falmer Press, London 1993.

study, research, management and communication. Looking back over time at the evolution of human civilization, we see that developments in the tools for the written word's production, preservation and dissemination have been milestones and drivers of cultural and social development. From this point of view, the digitization of texts was considered by many to be as important as the invention of the printing press in terms of its consequences for the production, dissemination and promotion of texts.

The technological applications and services are related to texts irrespective of their form and language, primarily concerning themselves with the promotion and study of the textual tradition. The consequences of the use of language technology are positive; they range from the creation of digital databases and thus easy access to large volumes of texts, the compilation of electronic dictionaries and text *corpora*, the possibilities of intertextual and comparative research, and the assistance in textual criticism, to the exploitation of the possibilities for distance language teaching, the enhancement of linguistic wealth and diversity, and the overcoming of language difficulties through machine translation or even the possibilities of synthesis and voice recognition³.

At the same time, however, various questions are often raised, particularly regarding, on the one hand, the ways of reproducing, producing and composing texts and, on the other, the latter's reception. These reflections are usually focused on the dangers of the technology's uncritical use, the illusion of validity and completeness that this technology often provides, the way in which learning and the reception of texts are affected, and the safeguarding of the texts' integrity.

3. The terms "speech synthesis" and "speech recognition" refer to the mechanical production and recognition of human speech. In the first case, a text is converted into speech by a computer system (text-to-speech, TTS), while in the second case, it is human speech that is converted into text (speech-to-text, STT). These fields are very important, as they also offer assistive technologies for people with disabilities, allowing people with visual or reading difficulties to "listen" to written texts, and people with mobility difficulties to "write" what they utter and speak, thus improving their daily life and facilitating their equal accessibility to the conditions shaped by the information society.

In this context, and given the fact that Christianity has a long textual tradition, it is obvious that the Church has been in dialogue with the modern digital world from its very beginnings, also through the digital form of its textual wealth, with the aim of disseminating and updating the Word of God in every context, age, and place. The universality of the Gospel's message allows or –better– invites the Churches to use every possible means offered by the modern technological revolution in the direction of cultivating and deepening this dimension. Of course, it is obvious that the Church does not see any technological breakthrough or progress through an exclusively functional and utilitarian prism; it always has to serve the human existence in the perspective of its deification, and in this sense it can and does use digital technology in various ways⁴.

The changes that the digital age marks regarding the texts of the Orthodox Church are in many respects common to those concerning the texts of the secular literature, but are particularly related to the high authority and doctrinal content of these texts, their interpretative pluralism, linguistic identity, and mode of reproduction, as well as the special link that exists between the Christian community and the reading, study, and dissemination of the divine message, and the quality of contemporary theological discourse.

In the present paper, we focus on the effects of technology on the textual tradition of the Orthodox Church, a tradition which, through all textual forms, has preserved the teaching of the divine word in its “ark”, untouched and unscathed throughout the ages, the interpretations and

4. It is worth noting that religiosity and life on the internet in many cases are not detached from real life; they are a continuation of it, and the internet can function as a means of expression of a pre-existing religiosity, in the context of a complementary relationship; see Gl. Young, “Reading and Praying Online: The Continuity of Religion Online and Online Religion in Internet Christianity”, in: L. Dawson – D. Cowan (eds.), *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, Routledge, New York & London 2004, p. 94. For the Church, of course, a relevant issue is whether technological means are a “mere conveyor” of messages and meanings– i.e., if they are innocent and neutral and everything depends on their use–, or whether they determine to a certain extent, small or large, the form and content of the message; see Al. Katsiaras, «Χαιρετισμός στο Συνέδριο τῶν Ρωμαιοκαθολικῶν Ἐπισκόπων τῆς Εὐρώπης γιὰ τὰ Μ.Μ.Ε.», *Θεολογία/Theologia* 85, 3 (2014), p. 326 (see also here, note 29).

manifestations of this word which have been imprinted and recorded⁵, as well as the precious linguistic treasure of the Greek language.

Positive Results – Challenges

1. *Text Dissemination and Rescue*

From the moment that digital information is quickly and easily disseminated without local or temporal restrictions, the digitization of the textual tradition ensures easy and flexible access to these texts⁶. What is important for the humanities is that the World Wide Web brings to the fore in the most timely and dynamic way the vision of creating an almost inexhaustible repository of human knowledge, making it possible to search and locate any text in a very short time.

From the realm of Christian literature, the Holy Bible is the sacred text that is available worldwide in a variety of digital formats, redesigned for electronic reading and listening. An app on a late-model iPhone 6 now includes 1000 different versions of the Bible in 700 languages, augmented with annotation tools and hundreds of reading plans with automated social media reminders to encourage reading habits. At the

5. The term “textual” tradition covers both the text as a static linguistic entity, the life cycle of which has been completed from the moment the text has left the hands of the author, and as a process of production within the context in which it was created, but also the “negotiable text”, the text as an object of understanding and interpretation on the part of the reader; for more, see the Gate for the Greek Language: https://www.greek-language.gr/greekLang/modern_greek/tools/lexica/glossology/show.html?id=301 [29.9.2023].

6. For example, as far as the texts of the Greek language are concerned, we have a digital library known as TLG (Thesaurus Linguae Graecae), a full-text electronic database that includes most surviving ancient Greek texts from Homer (8th century BC) to 600 AD as well as the historiographical and lexicographical texts and commentaries of Greek ancient literature up to the fall of Byzantium (1453), and is constantly being enriched. Today it contains more than 105 million words, 10,000 works and 4,000 authors; see https://www.lib.uoc.gr/documents/guide/TLG_2013.pdf [29.9.2023]. Other known digital text bases are the Project Gutenberg: <http://www.gutenberg.org/>, which contains all kinds of texts in many languages, as well as Perseus Digital Library: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>, which has on its website a considerable volume of texts of ancient Greek and Latin literature.

same time, through the possibilities of machine translation, the biblical text is immediately opened up in a multilingual environment. Websites offer quick and free access to various translations⁷.

The rich literature on the changes brought about by the use and widespread dissemination of the biblical text is extremely interesting, while at the same time many online surveys analyze the reading practices, motivations and experiences of digital bible users, compared to other environments⁸. It is widely accepted that the internet offers new possibilities for presenting the biblical text and its meaning⁹. This is a new practice for approaching the biblical text, which could be said to refer to a way of discovering a reality that predates the codex and/or the printed book, when the transmission and transfer of biblical passages at this primary stage were fragmentary and “liquid”, as it happens now with the web application¹⁰.

In the same context, the digitization of the theological literature of the Orthodox Church provides the possibility of cultivating an ecumenical theological dialogue¹¹, based on the texts, given the fact that researchers

7. Nowadays, the issue of the existence of many, often anonymous, biblical translations on the internet recalls the early Christian centuries, when various anonymous biblical translations, sometimes even oral ones, were circulating, and raises the issue of the reliability and validity of translation renderings; see Anna Koltsiou-Nikita, “Οί πρώτες άνώνυμες λατινικές μεταφράσεις τής Βίβλου και ή μετάφραση του Ίερωνύμου”, in: K. G. Tsiknakis, Maria Sik (eds.), *Βιβλικές μεταφράσεις. Ίστορία και πράξη. Έπετειακός τόμος για τά διακόσια χρόνια τής Έλληνικής Βιβλικής Έταιρίας*, Hellenic Bible Society, Athens 2021, pp. 131-146.

8. T. Hutchings, “E-Reading and the Christian Bible”, *Studies in Religion / Sciences Religieuses* 44, 4 (2015), pp. 423-440.

9. See P. Karamouzis, «Τά νέα μέσα κοινωνικής δικτύωσης και οί μετασχηματισμοί τής θρησκευτικής ταυτότητας», *Σύναξη/Synaxi* 147 (2018), p. 50.

10. T. Hutchings, “Now the Bible is an App: Digital Media and Changing Patterns of Religious Authority”, in: K. Granholm, M. Moberg, Sofia Sjö (eds.), *Religion, Media, and Social Change*, Routledge, New York – London 2015, p. 148.

11. The completeness and objectivity of the theological dialogue over time has been based on two basic preconditions: the availability and accessibility of the original texts and the guarantee of a valid translation for those who speak other languages. See, for example, Anna Koltsiou-Nikita, «Ό ρόλος τής μετάφρασης και τών έρμηνέων στο θεολογικό διάλογο έλληνόφωνης Άνατολής και λατινόφωνης Δύσης», in: *Φιλία και κοινωνία: Τιμητικός τόμος στον καθηγητή Γρηγόριο Δ. Ζιάκα*, Vanias Publications, Thessaloniki 2008, pp. 300-323.

from both Orthodox and other Christian traditions from all over the world can have access to the theological wealth of the Orthodox Churches and theological schools and scholars.

At the same time, thanks to digitization, a large number of older and modern theological texts are preserved, which were either never to be republished or are in danger of being lost due to physical deterioration. Indeed, digital libraries often ensure the survival and “immortality” of texts, safeguarding them from the dangers they were ran in conventional libraries.

2. *New Technological Tools for Digital Text Research*

The new technological tools offer many ways for the systematic research and exploitation of a digitally available text. In particular, the creation of digital collections of texts with common representative features, of collections that we call electronic “text *corpora*”¹², is at the cutting edge of research and offers the greatest potential for investigating theological discourse with thoroughness and scientific reliability.

Among other things, the linguistic digital tools contribute to the promotion of the Orthodox Church’s textual wealth and the latter’s value for the history of the Greek language, as well as for the upgrading and improvement of contemporary ecclesiastical discourse. Electronic dictionaries and other aid tools provide excellent opportunities both for personal study and understanding, and the remote teaching of these texts¹³.

12. A “corpus of texts” is perceived any collection of parts of a given language that are selected and arranged according to particular linguistic criteria, so that they can be used as a representative sample of that language; Titika Dimitroulia, «Τὰ ἠλεκτρονικὰ σώματα κειμένων καὶ ἡ ἀνάλυσή τους. Ἐρευνητικὲς προοπτικὲς γιὰ τὴ μελέτη τῆς λογοτεχνίας», *Σύγκριση/Syngkrisi* 31 (2022), pp. 160-184; see <https://ejournals.epublishing.ekt.gr/index.php/syngkrisi/article/view/3240> [30.9.2023].

13. Anna Koltsiou-Nikita, «Ἡ σύνδεση τῆς γλωσσικῆς διδασκαλίας μὲ τὰ κείμενα τῆς χριστιανικῆς γραμματείας. Μία διαχρονικὴ προσέγγιση», in: *Πρακτικὰ 1ου Πανελληνίου Συνεδρίου Θεολόγων*, vol. 1, *Διδακτικὲς προσεγγίσεις στὸ μάθημα τῶν Θρησκευτικῶν*, Thessaloniki 2017, pp. 14-18; see <http://www.1synedriotheologias.kmaked.eu> [29.9.2023] and «Τὰ λειτουργικὰ κείμενα τῆς Ὁρθοδόξου Ἐκκλησίας καὶ ἡ διδασκαλία τῆς ἀρχαίας ἑλληνικῆς γλώσσας: Ἀπὸ τὴ σχεδιογραφία στὴ σύγχρονη ἐξ ἀποστάσεως γλωσσικὴ διδασκαλία», in: Maria Rantzou (ed.), *Παράδοσις Χριστιανικῆς Παιδαγωγίας. Παιδεία*

The contribution to the field of textual critical edition is equally important. The digitization of manuscripts, the promotion of programs for reading manuscripts and the identification of scribes on the basis of textual data mark major steps forward in the field of critical editing process, especially for those texts with a rich and complex tradition, such as the biblical and patristic ones. Of course, the various digital environments with the new possibilities they offer to the editor require a series of decisions and choices that were not available in the era of the printing press. The publisher has the possibility of providing the reader with as complete a picture as possible of the textual variants and enriching it with extensive grammatical and hermeneutical commentaries, including multimedia material (audio, still and moving image archives)¹⁴.

Furthermore, as far as translation is concerned, digital Bible technologies have also been developed, particularly by Christian missionaries, who have incorporated digital tools into their translation work. Language technologies can assist and facilitate the translation of theological texts, even in less known languages; thus, especially through machine translation and interpretation, they can support small national languages and, more generally, language communication¹⁵. The use of digital technology and the Internet in the field of missionary work, the transmission and transfer of theological discourse, and Church news is widespread¹⁶.

καὶ σχολεῖο στὸν 21ο αἰῶνα. Μελέτες πρὸς τιμὴν τοῦ καθηγητῆ Ἰωάννη Β. Κογκούλη, Kyriakidis Publications, Thessaloniki 2021, pp. 123-136.

14. Nancy K. Hayles, "Translating Media: Why We Should Rethink Textuality", *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 16, 2 (2003), p. 271. Digital access in: <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/yale/summary/v016/16.2hayles.html>.

15. Besides, according to "language ethics", the translation (conventional or mechanical) is the main form of protecting the "endangered languages", G. Babiniotis, *Τὸ Βῆμα/Τὸ Ἴμα* 24-11-2008, Newspaper columns for textual technology.

16. Regarding the use of the new technologies by the various religious communities, see indicatively Heidi Campbell, "How Religious Communities negotiate New Media Religiously", in: Pauline Hope Cheong *et al.* (eds.), *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture: Perspectives, Practices, Futures*, Peter Lang, New York 2012, pp. 81-96.

3. *Hypertext: Navigating the “Sea of Knowledge”*

The original digital form of a text file was about to change, already in the mid-1960s, with the emergence of what we call *hypertext*¹⁷. With the help of hyperlinks, the text acquires a non-linear organization, allowing the user to follow reading paths based on his own associated links¹⁸. Hypertext leads to a new concept of writing, based on a new relationship between thought and space, on a different system of communication.

More particularly, regarding the theological texts, such a hypertext offers new possibilities for comparative and intertextual research, and critical dialogue; it also enhances interpretative and translational pluralism, as well as the development of critical thinking and text reception¹⁹.

Reflections

After the presentation of the positive results and challenges of digitization and in the context of a techno-skepticism that is developing in parallel, we will present some reflections, in our attempt to give some preliminary answers to certain indicative questions:

17. See Chr. Vandendorpe, *From Papyrus to Hypertext: Toward the Universal Digital Library*, transl. Phyllis Aronoff, H. Scott, University of Illinois Press, Illinois 2009, pp. 25-27. The term “hypertext” was first introduced by Ted Nelson in 1965, in his work *Literary Machines*. Nelson understands the hypertext as an ideal tool for rendering the functions of human thought and expressing the interconnections between the individual texts of human literary production. The first theoretical work on the hypertext is the following publication: J. D. Bolter, *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext, and the History of Writing*, Hillsdale, N.J., L. Erlbaum Associates 1991 (2001, Routledge).

18. Many speak about for the vision of the liberation of writing and reading from the tyranny of linearity; see R. Coover, “The end of books”, *New York Times Book Review* 21 (June 1992); see <http://wings.buffalo.edu/english/faculty/conte/syllabi/370/EndofBooks.htm> [17.9.2023].

19. For a thorough introduction to the subject, see Cl. Lamont, “Annotating a Text: Literary Theory and Electronic Hypertext”, in: K. Sutherland (ed.), *Electronic Text: Investigations in Method and Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1997, pp. 47-66.

1. To what Extend Does a Digital Library Guarantee the Safe Preservation and “Immortality” of Texts?

We are nowadays familiar with the fact that never before has so much knowledge and so much information been stored in something as vast as the internet “cloud”. Thus, who can guarantee that a possible computer death would not lead to the loss of huge data quantities? Should we therefore also look for a fallback way of securing the texts that have preserved centuries of knowledge and tradition intact?

History has taught us that in the past socio-political and other types of changes have led to the loss of texts. Let us recall, for example, the texts of Linear B, many texts that have been kept in the Library of Alexandria, as well as texts that were erased from manuscripts in order for something else to be written on them.

Due to the possibility of something similar happening in the future, several initiatives are currently being developed. In Austria, for example, the “Memory of Mankind” project is currently under way. This is an attempt for the accumulated knowledge of our time to be collected and stored in underground caves carved out of one of the oldest salt mines in the world. This is done using a special process described as “ceramic microfilm”, which is considered the most durable data storage system in the world²⁰.

2. Is the Integrity and Authenticity of the Textual Tradition Endangered by the Prevalence of the Digital Form?

The passage of texts from the hard stone of inscriptions to the computer hard disk has been accompanied by various changes.

In their earliest phases, the manuscript tradition and reproduction of texts were characterized by the personal stamp of the scribe and the value of the unique and unrepeatable.

20. In this way, they hope to create an indelible archive of our way of life by recording official documents, details of our culture, scientific papers, biographies, popular novels, news, and even images on square ceramic plates. As Martin Kunze notes, “We are trying to create something that will not only be a collection of information for a distant future, but also a gift for our grandchildren”; see <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20161018-the-worlds-knowledge-is-being-buried-in-a-salt-mine> [29.9.2023].

Subsequently, printed publications utilized the manuscript tradition to a great extent yet the sense of relevance as regards the authenticity and integrity of the text did not cease to exist – hence, the republication of many texts.

For most people, text digitization is nowadays creating the illusion of absolute validity and thoroughness; thus, we are identifying the form of the text displayed on our screen with the genuine and authentic one. But is this really the case?

We know that whatever gains a place in a digital *corpus* is surrounded by the prestige of technology and monopolizes integrity and authenticity. At the same time, what is stereotyped rather highlighted is the stereotype, while what is rare or deviant is lost or suppressed. This may involve the manipulation of thought. More specifically, in the case of texts dealing with doctrinal issues, history has taught us that they have often undergone a series of corrective interventions; the original text may have been handed down by a perhaps unique witness and it has been survived thanks to him²¹.

At the same time, due to the great ease and low cost with which a text can be reproduced, replaced, altered and updated or withdrawn from the internet, there is a risk that it may lead to a textual “liquidity”, something that has already been pointed out in studies on the digital biblical text²².

21. In the manuscript tradition of a Byzantine translation of a Latin text, of the forty manuscripts that contain it, only one saves the original and authentic script, while in all others the text has been emended; see Anna Koltsiou-Nikita, *Δημητρίου Κυδώνη, Μετάφραση τοῦ ψευδοαυγουστίνειου Soliloquia (Τί ἂν εἴποι ψυχὴ μόνη πρὸς μόνον τὸν θεόν). Εἰσαγωγή, κείμενο, εὑρετήρια* [Corpus Philosophorum Medii Aevi, Philosophi Byzantini, no. 11], Athens 2005, pp. 142*-144*. Even the authenticity of an entire extract can be based on a few witnesses; see Anna Koltsiou-Nikita, «Περὶ τῆς γνησιότητος τῆς περικοπῆς τῆς μοιχαλίδας (John 7, 53-8, 11): Προβληματισμοὶ κριτικῆς κειμένου μὲ ἀφορμὴ μιᾶ κριτικῆ θεώρησης τῆς περικοπῆς στὴ λατινόφωνη Δύση κατὰ τὸν 12ο αἰώνα», *Σύνθεσις/Synthesis* 3 (2013), pp. 140-165.

22. See D. G. Ford, “The (Un)Stable Digital Bible: A Destabilising Peritext and Stabilising Epitext”, *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture* 8 (2019), pp. 361-81. On the passage of the biblical text from the scroll to the codex and the mass production of printed books of the Bible thanks to the invention of printing, as well as the impact of these changes on the reception of the biblical text, see J. S. Siker, *Liquid Scripture: The Bible in a Digital World*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis 2017.

3. *What are the Possible Implications of Digital Reading and Study of the Texts for the Deepening of the Theological Discourse?*

The first Christian communities were from very early associated with books and reading. Indicative of this is the theory expounded by Guglielmo Cavallo, who believes that the early Christians' literacy contributed to the passage from the scroll –of which the way of reading resembles to that of the computer screen in terms of the text flow in front of the reader's eyes– to the codex, i.e. the book form²³.

The question here is whether and in what ways reading on a screen differs from the way we've used to reading in print or in manuscript.

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It is widely accepted that digital texts require a different kind of reading and, consequently, a different kind of learning and thinking process. First of all, when we are reading a printed text in a book form rather than on the screen, it seems to better understand it. In the first case, the sense of touch is also present – a literal contact with the text, together with its visual geography. Furthermore, the printed traditional text remains essentially linear, in the sense that it is usually read from beginning to end and jumps to points of special interest are difficult.

On the contrary, digital texts, which are usually multimodal, abolish this linearity. The reader can follow various links according to his interests and questions. This leads to disorientation, distraction and cognitive overload, i.e. simultaneous processing of content and relationships between different contents. The hypertext, as a cognitive technology, takes up anew and transforms the original text²⁴. It leads to a different type of reading experience, which seems to pierce through the crystalline

23. As far as the production, circulation, and use of the book in early Christian times, see H. Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1995.

24. The hypertext allows an easy, economical and flexible application of the old practice of footnotes; in this way, an editor or publisher mediates between the text and the reader, by privileging some of the possible interpretations of the text or obscuring others; see Cl. Lamont, "Annotating a Text: Literary Theory and Electronic Hypertext", in: K. Sutherland (ed.), *Electronic Text: Investigations in Method and Theory*, *op.cit.* (note 19), pp. 47-66.

texture of a strictly structured text and turns into a chain of impressions²⁵. Most scholars are of the opinion that there are different benefits and disadvantages to reading in print and digital formats – the challenge is to clarify what these are and how to balance them.

According to the above, texts that require focused mind and reflection, such as the theological ones, the way of reading determines the degree of perception and understanding, since the same words may be subject to multiple interpretations, deepening and, before anything else, integration into the broader context of the text. A fragmented and multimodal way of reading influences the way of textual rendering and reception of theological concepts, which usually require complex thinking and long narratives, not just quick transmission and communication of data.

4. *What are the Implications of Digital Technology for the Quality and Production of Online Theological Discourse and Future “Texts”?*

The contemporary theological textual discourse is adapted to the rules set by the screen²⁶. The possibilities of online publishing, the anonymity of the author of an online text and the pursuit of the attractiveness of the text influence the quality of the contemporary theological discourse and, to some extent, mortgage the texts which are going to be bequeathed to the next generation²⁷. The ecclesiastical discourse and the Church’s activities on the internet seem sometimes to gain in breadth, but to lose in depth²⁸.

25. Thanks to the ubiquitous internet advertising, not to mention the popularity of text messaging on mobile phones, we are obviously in position to read more today than we did in the 1970s or 1980s, when television was our medium of choice; still, it’s a different kind of reading, and behind it lies a different kind of thinking - perhaps a new sense of the self; see N. Carr, “Is Google Making us Stupid? What the Internet is Doing to our Brains”, *The Atlantic* (2008), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/306868/> [9-8-2023].

26. J. Wise, *The Social Church. A Theology of Digital Communication*, Moody Publishers, Chicago 2014, pp. 136-137.

27. See K. A. Topalis, *Ὁ λόγος τοῦ Θεοῦ στὴν ψηφιακὴ ἐποχὴ. Μιὰ νέα πρόκληση γιὰ τὴν Ὀρθόδοξη Ἐπικοινωνιακὴ Θεολογία. Ψηφιακὴ ἐπανάσταση καὶ Ὀρθόδοξη θεώρηση* (Dissertation), E.K.Π.A./N.K.U.Ath., Athens 2019, where someone can also find extensive bibliography on the subject.

28. G. Mantzaridis, «Ἡ ὀρθόδοξη ποιμαντικὴ στὴν ψηφιακὴ ἐποχὴ», *2ο Διεθνὲς Συνέδριο Ψηφιακῶν Μέσων καὶ Ὀρθόδοξης Ποιμαντικῆς, 14 Ἰουνίου 2021*, see: <http://www.dmopc18.com/el/program-2/>. See also V. Gaitanis, *Homo Mediator καὶ Homo Theologicus*.

In this context, the sermons in the Church also seem to gradually change their form, as they are sifting outside the temple. The internet as the Church pulpit is shaping the profile of an internet preacher and leading to a redefinition of both the structure and the content of the long preaching tradition of our Church²⁹. The internet preacher, whether through orally transmitted or written digital text, does not address a specific and homogeneous audience within the church, as has been the case in the past. The sermon on the Internet becomes autonomous; it is a sermon which is assimilated in a completely personal way, in so far as it is not linked to a certain ritual, i.e. the Divine Liturgy³⁰. The boundaries of what is acceptable are out of control; thanks to digital technology, everyone can have access to it. This lack of context or, better still, the context collapse brought about by online communication is often to the detriment of a thorough and serious theological analysis³¹.

Διαλεκτική τῶν Μέσων Μαζικῆς Ἐπικοινωνίας καὶ Θεολογία τῆς κοινῆς. Διαστάσεις καὶ δυνατότητες μιᾶς ὀρθόδοξης «ἐπικοινωνιακῆς Θεολογίας» στὸν μεταμοντέρνο κόσμος, Grigoris Publications, Athens 2004.

29. Herbert Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) in his book, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (London and New York 1964), coined the phrase: “The Medium is the Message”. According to him, we should primarily study the media themselves and not their content. His next book, *The Medium Is the Message: An Inventory of Effects* (Bantam Books 1967) was something of a play with this fascinating phrase: he explored the impact of media on the human experience. Each medium defines the message; the latter changes content depending on the medium involved in its delivery. The content of a message is influenced by the composition and function of the medium; newspaper, radio, television, computer, tablet, smartphone, and the like may convey the same message, but they intervene in their own way – the structure of their technology. This way determines not only the production but also the meaning of the message and its reception. The question, moreover, for the agents/creators of the ecclesiastical discourse, rhetorical and visual, is the consequences that this medium has for others and the life of the ecclesiastical community.

30. See F. Gautier, “Religion, Media and the Dynamics of Consumerism in Globalising Societies”, in: K. Granholm, M. Moberg, Sofia Sjö (eds.), *Religion, Media, and Social Change*, Routledge, New York – London 2015, p. 76.

31. As Postman argues, when the carrier of this discourse is the screen, it appears in a context with certain “postmodern” features, affecting the final message that results from the transmission of this discourse: the listeners-viewers are aware that, by simply pressing a key, they can interrupt the transmission of the “sacred” message and switch to the transmission of a “non-sacred” event, e.g., from the direct transmission of the Divine Liturgy or from the quotes or speeches and exhortations of Church members to a report on a scandal or, more often, an advertisement or a sporting event; see N. Postman, *H*

The author of the text is often forced to limit himself to rudimentary concepts and meanings, which diminish or even discolor their texts³². The vertical, unified and centralized nature of the communicative relationship with the audience, which characterized the authority of the religious or ecclesiastical preacher in the past³³, is replaced by horizontal communication forms, and the communication content is constantly being under negotiation³⁴.

Epilogue

As it appears from the above, digital transformation is a reality and digital technology has influenced the textual tradition in various ways – and it will continue to do so.

As we are living in a digital world, we believe that the optimistic outlook is that digital technology can and should serve to preserve the treasure trove of theological texts and eventually become a deacon of God's word in several ways. To those concerned about the security and future of the texts, we might recall that a trilingual inscription on a black granite stele, the famous "Rosetta Stone", provided the key to

Πυξίδα τοῦ Μέλλοντος. Πῶς τὸ παρελθὸν μπορεῖ νὰ βελτιώσει τὸ μέλλον μας, transl. Katia Metaxa, Kastaniotis Publications, Athens 2002.

32. The pursuit and attention seeking of the audience stimulates an increasing supply of religious and spiritual material; see P. Fischer-Nielsen, "Pastors on the Internet: Online Responses to Secularization", in: P. H. Cheong, P. Fischer-Nielsen, S. Gelfgren, Ch. Ess (eds.), *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture Perspectives, Practices and Futures*, Peter Lang, New York 2012, pp. 115-130.

33. J. Wise, *The Social Church. A Theology of Digital Communication*, Moody Publishers, Chicago 2014, pp. 136-137.

34. The familiar user has the opportunity to be a transmitter, receiver and mediator, as well as a judge of religious discourse. Websites and blogs reflect some "digital materializations" of the views of various religious groups or religious individuals or organizations, which think they are instrumentally using various elements of cyberspace in order to control, shape, entrench, legitimize, naturalize, and activate certain religious communities; see Cheong Pauline Hope, H. Alexander, Kwon Kyounghee Hazel, "The Chronicles of Me: Understanding Blogging as a Religious Practice", *Journal of Media and Religion* 7 (2008), pp. 107-131.

decoding the hieroglyphic script and unlocked the secrets of one of the world's oldest lost civilizations. Furthermore, papyrus fragments that resisted the ravages of time and changes in writing style have preserved the earliest Gospel extracts. We can also bear in mind that technology helped us to read the so-called palimpsest manuscripts and recover texts that had been erased.

Ultimately man, the only created being endowed with the gift of reason and rational thought, of writing and reading, can continue to move towards perfection and true paradise, creatively utilizing technology and the means it offers, without being swept away by the raging waters that lead to the tiny illusory virtual digital “paradise” that this technology often promises. Can contemporary Christians continue to walk the path of faith «*ἐπόμενος τοῖς πατράσι*», without being seduced by the teachings and programmed precepts of the AI preacher, who has recently appeared in the digital world³⁵.

35. Recently, on 11 June 2023, at the German city of Fürth, more than 300 people attended a church service created by ChatGPT. The forty-minute service in St. Paul's Church was created by ChatGPT and Jonas Simmerlein, theologian and philosopher from the University of Vienna. It included the sermon, prayers and music. Various publications with striking headlines, such as “AI takes over preaching in church as ‘Deus ex machina’”, or “AI replaces preacher in German church”, have seen the light of day. Faithful members of the flock listened intently to the AI preacher, who called them to leave the past behind, focus on the challenges of the present, overcome the fear of death and keep their faith in Jesus Christ alive. Many of them were reportedly frustrated by the lack of interaction between the AI and the church; see <https://nealive.gr/technologia/michanis-theos-technitinoimosyni-anelave-to-kirygma-se-germaniki-ekklisia/> [29.9.2023].