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# UKRAINIAN PROTESTANTS AND DIGITAL CULTURE

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## Abstract

Ukrainian Protestantism in recent decades has found fertile ground on the Internet. Activities through the Internet environment proved to be more successful than actual activities, as it was possible to cover larger areas and scales. Although the Internet is an additional option to the offline reality, it is also perceived by Ukrainian Protestants more as a marketing tool. This study examines two aspects of Protestant dialogue with digital culture: educational and applied. The educational direction is represented by the ecumenical curriculum in digital theology, initiated by Protestants. This educational center seeks to overcome confessional differences by establishing a common Christian order regarding the mission and place of the church in the digital world. The applied aspect is presented by studies on Internet communication of Ukrainian Protestants.

**Keywords:** digital culture, media activity, Ukrainian Protestantism.

## Introduction

Since the first half of the 20th century, Protestantism in Ukraine has been represented mainly by Slavic cadres and consists of Baptists, Pentecostals, and Seventh-day Adventists.<sup>1</sup> The anti-Trinitarian wing is represented by Jehovah's Witnesses, although there is mutual non-recognition between them and the Protestant majority, and there is little contact. In the post-Soviet period, several waves of charismatic movement emerged in Ukraine, but the

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<sup>1</sup> А. Колодний and П. Яроцький, eds., *Історія релігії в Україні: Навчальний посібник*, 2nd ed. (1999; repr., Київ: Знання, 2017). [A. Kolodnyi, and P. Yarotskyi, eds. *History of Religion in Ukraine: Textbook.*]; А. Колодний and П. Яроцький, eds., *Пізній протестантизм в Україні (п'ятидесятники, адвентисти, свідки Єгови). Історія релігій в Україні. У 10 т., 2nd ed., vol. 6* 2007; repr., (Київ: Коло, 2017) [A. Kolodnyi, and P. Yarotskyi, eds. *Late Protestantism in Ukraine (Pentecostals, Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses). History of religions in Ukraine*]; Catherine Wanner, *Communities of the Converted: Ukrainians and Global Evangelism* (NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), 305.

evangelical majority distanced itself somewhat from charismatics, and attempts by the most popular charismatic pastors to create megachurches provoked theological and administrative resistance from evangelicals.<sup>2</sup> The church (for Ukrainians it is mostly Orthodoxy, which is practiced by 80% of the population) performs many representative functions, where the most important is ethnic and political: "Ukrainian means Orthodox." Being part of different states and a complex political history have formed a unique denominational palette in these lands, where Ukraine is not so much like Europe, with the option to "attend the national church or not attend any," as it is the United States, where there is a real choice of denominational models.<sup>3</sup>

For the position of "church number two" in Ukraine, two types of reformed Christianity are de facto competing--Greek Catholics (about 10% of the population) and (mostly late/evangelical) Protestants (about 2%)<sup>4</sup>. The modern post-Soviet period of studying the media activities of Ukrainian Protestants, as expected, began with a review and systematization of their achievements in earlier times. In these works on the history of Protestantism in the Ukrainian lands, confessional periodicals (or their replacement in periods when the authorities forbade these churches to publish) appear as a documentary source.<sup>5</sup> Eventually, the Protestant press or *samizdat* of the past became an independent subject of

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<sup>2</sup> "Заявление старших служителей христианских евангельских церквей Украины по поводу деятельности Сандея Аделаджа, повлекшей за собой негативные последствия для христиан Украины." Институт религиозной свободы (ИРС), December 29, 2008. <https://www.irs.in.ua/ru/zayava-starshih-sluzhiteliv-hristiyanskih-jevangeljskih-cerkov-ukrajini-z-privodu-diyalnosti-sandeya-adeladzha>. ["Statement by senior ministers of the Christian Evangelical Churches of Ukraine regarding the activities of Sunday Adelaja, which entailed negative consequences for Christians in Ukraine." Institute for Religious Freedom]; "Обращение глав Евангельских Церквей Украины от 25.04.2016, касательно Сандея Аделаджи и Владимира Мунтяна." Киевская еврейская мессианская община (КЕМО), 2016. <https://old.kemokiev.org/worldnews/2957-obrashhenie-glav-evangeljskih-tserkvej-ukrainy-ot-25-04-2016-kasatelno-sandeya-adeladzi-i-vladimira-muntyana>. ["Address of the heads of the Evangelical Churches of Ukraine dated 04/25/2016, regarding Sunday Adelaja and Volodymyr Muntian." Kiev Jewish Messianic Community]

<sup>3</sup> J. Casanova, "Ethno-Linguistic and Religious Pluralism and Democratic Construction in Ukraine," in *Post-Soviet Political Order: Conflict and State Building* (London: Routledge, 1998), 81–103.

<sup>4</sup> Mykhailo Cherenkov, "Protestants and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church: In Search of Inclusive Solutions," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 38, no. 2 (2018): 40–54, <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol38/iss2/3>.

<sup>5</sup> С. Головащенко, *История евангельско-баптистского движения в Украине. Материалы и документы*. (Одесса: Богомыслие, 1998) [S. Holovashchenko, *History of the Evangelical-Baptist Movement in Ukraine. Materials and documents.*]; Юрий Решетников, "Становлення та Диференціація евангельського руху в Україні." (Дисертація на здобуття наукового ступеня кандидата філософських наук. спеціальність 09.00.11 – релігієзнавство., 1998) [Yurii Reshetnikov. "Formation and Differentiation of the Evangelical Movement in Ukraine." The dissertation on competition of a scientific degree of the candidate of philosophical sciences. specialty]; І. Монолатій, "Українсько-німецькі міжконфесійні взаємини на Покутті у висвітленні часопису 'Віра і наука,'" *Збірник праць Науково-дослідного центру періодики.*, no. 9 (2001): 141–53. [I. Monolatii. "Ukrainian-German interfaith relations in Pokut in the coverage of the journal 'Faith and Science.'" Collection of works of the Research Center of Periodicals].

study: as a manifestation of national culture,<sup>6</sup> and a manifestation of opposition to the Soviet regime.<sup>7</sup> Mediated forms of activity of Protestant churches are considered as stages of social mission,<sup>8</sup> manifestations of self-organization of believers, an example of a grassroots initiative,<sup>9</sup> ways of confessional representation,<sup>10</sup> and a means of analyzing their theological and organizational differences.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, a general confessional review of the virtualized Protestant religion that takes place in Ukraine is an important and relevant area of this study.

## Digital Theology

Despite the descriptive and fragmentary nature of most studies on the media activity of Ukrainian Protestants, this focus of research takes root in scientific discourse and is enriched by exploratory research, which is conducted in the departments of religious journalism, religious studies, and history departments. Protestant digital theology in Ukraine is a new phenomenon. This niche has been the least developed and explored since the collapse of the Soviet Union. This is not surprising, since prominent scholars among Ukrainian Protestants have only recently begun to appear, and only in the last decade have we seen dissertations in the field of theology written by Protestants. Therefore, we can say with

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<sup>6</sup> Я. Клачков, "Протестантська преса для українців у Польщі (1918–1939)," *Збірник праць науково-дослідного центру періодики*, no. 12 (2004): 62–82. [J. Klaczkow. "The Protestant Press for Ukrainians in Poland (1918–1939)." Collection of works of the research center of periodicals]; А. Ігнатуша, "Протестантська періодика України як суспільно-політичне явище 20-х рр. ХХ ст." (автореф... канд. іст. наук. – 07.00.01. Запорізький національний університет, 2009), 20. [A. Ihnatusha. "Protestant Periodicals of Ukraine as a Socio-Political Phenomenon of the 1920s."].

<sup>7</sup> О. Лакно, "Підпільна видавнича діяльність як прояв опозиційності Спільки церков євангельських християн-баптистів," *Наука. Релігія. Суспільство*, no. 2 (2007): 45–51. [O. Lakhno "Underground Publishing as a Manifestation of the Opposition of the Union of Evangelical Baptist Churches." Science. Religion. Society].

<sup>8</sup> М. Мокієнко, "Пізній протестантизм в Україні: інституційний та суспільно-політичний аспекти (1991–2004 рр.);" (дис... канд. іст. наук: 07.00.01. Запорізький національний університет, 2007). [M. Mokienko. "Late Protestantism in Ukraine: Institutional and Socio-Political Aspects (1991-2004)."]

<sup>9</sup> О. Спис, "Соціально-політичні і соціокультурні імплікації пізнього протестантизму в процесі трансформації українського суспільства" (дис... канд. філос. наук : 09.00.11. Інститут філософії імені Г.С. Сковороди Національної академії наук України, 2008). [O. Spys. "Socio-political and socio-cultural implications of late Protestantism in the process of transformation of Ukrainian society."]

<sup>10</sup> С. Свистунов, "Особенности внешних коммуникаций религиозных организаций: на примере протестантизма," in *Гуманитарные науки: межвузовский сборник научных статей. Часть I*. (Караганда: ТОО "САНАТ-Полиграфия," 2009), 174–79. [S. Svystunov. "Features of External Communications of Religious Organizations: the Case of Protestantism." In Humanities: interuniversity collection of scientific articles].

<sup>11</sup> М. Петрушкевич, "Конфесійні особливості протестантської комунікативної системи," in *Наукові записки. Серія "Культурологія" (Проблеми культурної ідентичності: глобальний та локальний виміри. Матеріали міжнародної наукової конференції 23–24 квітня 2010 року* (Острого: Видавництво Національного університету "Острозька академія," 2010), 467–71. [M. Petrushkevych. "Confessional features of the Protestant communicative system." In Scientific Notes. Culturology Series (Problems of Cultural Identity: Global and Local Dimensions. Proceedings of the International Scientific Conference April 23-24, 2010)].

confidence that Ukrainian Protestant theology has lagged behind modern world trends for decades. That is already a stage for the West, but for Protestant intellectuals from Ukraine a field for initial study and further scientific research.

In the spring of 2019, the digital theology curriculum was launched in Ukraine in cooperation with the Center for Digital Theology of the University of Durham (UK) and two Ukrainian educational centers, the Realis Education Center, which is mostly Protestant, and a non-governmental organization "Open Orthodox University of St. Sophia-Wisdom." Teachers of the program define digital theology as attempts to understand theistic faith in the context of digital culture.<sup>12</sup> They single out some different levels, or waves, of Digital Theology: (1) The use of digital technology to communicate or teach theology as a traditional academic subject; (2) Theological research enabled by digitality or digital culture; (3) Intentional, sustained and reflexive theologically-resourced engagement with digitality/digital culture.<sup>13</sup> It seems that Heidi Campbell<sup>14</sup> is perceived as one of the leading experts in the field.

The program consists of four modular courses: theology, culture, and ethics; biblical theology and culture; modern issues of Christian ethics; and digital technologies and culture. The program lasts more than a year. Graduates receive a certificate with the right to study for a master's degree at the University of Durham at the Realis Center. The authors of the program are scientists from the Research Center for Digital Theology, Great Britain, and employees of the Christian Center "Realis." The lecturers are Peter Phillips (University of Durham, UK), Jonas Kurlberg (University of Durham, UK), Stephen Williams (University of Queens, Ireland), Georgy Kovalenko (Open Orthodox University, Ukraine), and Serhii Tymchenko (Christian Center, Ukraine). Lectures addressed the ethics and limitations of artificial intelligence, the Bible on social media, transhumanism, extraterrestrial civilizations, and mission through the IT profession.

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<sup>12</sup> "Цифровое богословие. Что это? Как это? Для чего это?" Сергей Тимченко в Realis Talks #2." *YouTube*, April 29, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cf0nXtsrEQw>. ["Digital Theology. What is it? Like this? What is it for?" Sergey Tymchenko at Realis Talks].

<sup>13</sup> P. Phillips, K. Schiefelbein-Guerrero, and J. Kurlberg, "Defining Digital Theology: Digital Humanities, Digital Religion and the Particular Work of the CODEC Research Centre and Network," *Open Theology*, no. 5 (2019): 29-43.

<sup>14</sup> Heidi Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010); Heidi Campbell, ed., *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (London: Routledge, 2013).; Heidi Campbell and Stephen Garner, *Networked Theology: Negotiating Faith in Digital Culture* (Baker Academic, 2016).; Heidi Campbell, "The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online," The OAKTrust digital repository at Texas, 2020, <https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/handle/1969.1/187891>.

Target audience: clergy (pastors, priests, missionaries, preachers, mission staff), digital professionals, theologians and scholars, and a wide range of Christians interested in the impact of the digital world on Christianity and modern preaching.

The organizers of the Ukrainian curriculum declare the following goals: to provide a general introduction to digital theology as part of a broader theological project in its historical and intellectual development; to help students understand the Christian thought of different traditions in their historical, social, and cultural context; to help students critically evaluate and understand the digital culture and its impact on modern society; to study the theological ethics of digital culture; and to understand how the changes taking place in the church through digital culture affect the mission of the Church.

The focus of the curriculum is the theological evaluation of digital culture and the search for attempts at Christian mission under these conditions. The organizers try not to allow the digital context to be distorting, to distort the gospel message. “God's presence is not limited to living communication. In inanimate, digital communication, the Lord remains the same,”<sup>15</sup> they declare. The digital environment is also seen as a way to practice faith: “It is my belief that God is also present in technologies and must speak through them. Technology, then, is redeemed by the presence of God. But if God is in technology, we can encounter God through it.”<sup>16</sup>

And outside of this program, Ukrainian Protestants are noticing the digital environment and conducting theological reflections on it.

### **Internet Communication Studies of Ukrainian Protestants**

According to Svitlana Kozyriatska, “since 2010, Ukrainian researchers have been actively paying attention to the role of the Internet in religious communication, the specifics of news in religious online publications in Ukraine, the quality of religious news in secular online media, analysis of church media strategies, and the Internet under the discipline of

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<sup>15</sup> О. Гордеев, “‘Більше розуміння Бога та людей’. Випускники програми ‘Цифрове богослів’я’ про зміну бачення світу та суспільства,” Реаліс, 2020, <https://realis.org/news/digital-theology-program-reviews/>. [O. Gordeev. “‘Greater understanding of God and people’. Graduates of the Digital Theology program about changing the worldview and society.”]

<sup>16</sup> О. Gordyeyev, “Peter M. Phillips: ‘the Idea of Digital Theology Is to Look at Both Digital Culture and Theology and Ask How One Speaks to the Other,’” Релігійно-Інформаційна Служба України, 2020, [https://risu.ua/en/peter-m-phillips-quot-the-idea-of-digital-theology-is-to-look-at-both-digital-culture-and-theology-and-ask-how-one-speaks-to-the-other-quot\\_n103546](https://risu.ua/en/peter-m-phillips-quot-the-idea-of-digital-theology-is-to-look-at-both-digital-culture-and-theology-and-ask-how-one-speaks-to-the-other-quot_n103546). [Religious Information Service of Ukraine].

communication and its methods.”<sup>17</sup> Until now, their attention has been absorbed by the church press. The studies of radio and television publications form a smaller group, i.e., now it is a niche segment.

According to Kozyriatska,

the distribution of scientific interests (depending on the functions of modern religious media, which are visible) is divided into three areas:

1) religious journalism, the study of which takes place in the following coordinate system: the typology of religious publications (confessional), their functions, the ratio of professional (journalistic) and confessional components in these publications, that is, it is about the priority of journalistic standards or confessional policy, the functioning of ethnoreligious stereotypes in the media environment, etc.; 2) PR strategies of Christian churches through the prism of virtual media and resources; 3) missionary work and evangelization on the Internet as communicative strategies of denominations.<sup>18</sup>

Most studies list<sup>19</sup> specific online publications of Ukrainian Protestants and name their functions. In general, the functions of Christian media resources are divided into several types: media information, communication (external and internal), news, value-regulating, recreational, creation of archives and depositories, databases, public relations, establishing relations between community members and denominational ones (missionary work, evangelization, catechesis, proselytism, coordination of church services, evangelism, apologetics, broadcasting information of religious content or related to religious activities that take place outside cyberspace, uniting, and retaining believers through the formation of the necessary information field).<sup>20</sup>

In the 21st century religious life is moving into the online environment. This caused a surge in the activities of electronic confessional media of various kinds and made them a new means of communicating the mission of the church in Ukrainian society.

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<sup>17</sup> С. Козиряцька, “Релігійна журналістика в Україні: огляд наукових праць,” *Держава та регіони. Серія: Соціальні комунікації*, no. 1(33) (2018): 67–72. [S. Kozyriatska, “Religious Journalism in Ukraine: A Review of Scientific Papers.” State and regions. Series: Social Communications].

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Мар’яна Пальчинська, “Віртуалізація у релігійному житті сучасної України (соціально-філософський аспект),” (дис... канд. наук : 09.00.03. Південноукраїнський національний педагогічний університет імені К. Д. Ушинського, 2009). [Mariana Palchynska, “Virtualization in the religious life of modern Ukraine (socio-philosophical aspect).”]; М. Петрушкевич, *Релігійні комунікації: християнський контекст* (Острого: Вид-во Національного університету “Острозька академія,” 2011), 288. [Mariia Petrushkevych, Religious communications: the Christian context. Ostroh: Ostroh Academy National University Publishing House.]

<sup>20</sup> С. Козиряцька, *Мережеві християнські видання українського медіапростору: монографія* (Запоріжжя: Просвіта, 2017), 192. [S. Kozyriatska, Network Christian editions of the Ukrainian media space: monograph. Zaporizhia: Prosvita Publishers].

Svitlana Fylypchuk<sup>21</sup> analyzes Protestant official sites, social networks, and the blogosphere according to the features of new media outlined by E. Toffler: interactivity, mobility, reversibility, and the possibility of interconnection. The access of churches to the Internet provided them with additional tools to achieve their goals and had a liberating effect, involving a large number of ordinary believers in the evaluation, discussion, dissemination, and production of religious content. This is a new forum that provides an online environment for Christian denominations, transforming traditional types of social and religious interaction. In particular, blogging on social networks takes religious information out of the church circle, makes it accessible to the general, non-church community, puts official messages on the same level as the opinions of informal leaders of online communication. It should be noted that Fylypchuk summed up that the important innovations of recent years are the distribution of live broadcasts on Facebook and YouTube, which Protestants make more often than other denominations, as well as the emergence of Protestant-founded Telegram channels.

Therefore, we can say that the period of Web 1.0 in Protestant communication lasted until the late 2000s. These were separate sites, the audience was small, young, but the opportunities for feedback were limited. A subsequent turn to Web 2.0 occurred in 2013 when the sale of smartphones on the international market exceeded the number of mobile phones, and Euromaidan began in Ukraine, which sharpened the demand for operational information.

Since 2018, 4G coverage has been expanding in Ukraine,<sup>22</sup> starting with the biggest cities. There were 27.46 million internet users in Ukraine in January 2020. The number of internet users in Ukraine increased by 1.5 million (+5.7%) between 2019 and 2020. Internet penetration in Ukraine stood at 63% in January 2020. The number of mobile connections in Ukraine in January 2020 was equivalent to 139% of the total population; most users own more than one mobile number.<sup>23</sup>

At least since the mid-2010s, social networks have been the main sector of the Internet used by Ukrainian religious organizations. After the Ukrainian government blocked Russian social networks vk.com, ok.ru, mail.ru, yandex.ru, and others in 2018, Ukrainian

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<sup>21</sup> С. Филипчук, "Трансформації нових медіа християнських конфесій України," *Схід*, no. 5(157) (2018): 92–98. [S. Fylypchuk, "Transformations of New Media of Christian Denominations of Ukraine."]

<sup>22</sup> "Government Signs a Memorandum That Will Ensure 4G Coverage of 90% of Ukraine's Territory." Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, October 29, 2019. <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/en/news/uryad-pidpisav-memorandum-shcho-zabezpechit-pokritttya-4g-na-90-teritoriyi-ukrayini>.

<sup>23</sup> Simon Kemp. "Digital 2020: Ukraine." DataReportal, February 18, 2020 <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-ukraine>.



users switched to American counterparts. The most popular websites in Ukraine in 2020 were (1) google.com, (2) youtube.com, (3) facebook.com, and (7) instagram.com.<sup>24</sup>

With the help of new media, the church penetrates the daily life of society, expresses its reaction, and promotes its positions.<sup>25</sup> According to Yuliana Lavrysh, the presence of priests on social networks destroys the stereotypes of "own" and "foreign" and illustrates the clergy not as formidable mentors, but on the contrary as mentor-friends who, like everyone else, listen to music, read books, travel, etc., which greatly simplifies their communication with the general public.<sup>26</sup>

New media as tools of communication have allowed religious media to establish closer relations with the audience because the main advantage of new media is the possibility of quick feedback and controversy, says M. Burdeina.<sup>27</sup> She also sees in social networks the potential for effective dialogue between Christian broadcasters and their audience, wide opportunities for feedback, and the ability to respond quickly to social events. Web 2.0 has fewer technical limitations (including the relatively infinite volume of web pages and gigabytes of video), allowing illustrative and multimedia messages.

According to Uliana Sevastianiv, the impetus for the dialogue between the church and digital culture in Ukraine was made by the activity of Protestant churches on the Internet. According to her, "Protestant sites were immediately quite interactive--open forums and chat rooms for discussion, places for common prayer, the opportunity to comment and influence the religious system."<sup>28</sup> The dialogic nature of the Ukrainian Protestant media is present not only at the level of individual visitors and interfaith understanding but also, above all, at expert religious sites.

The impetus for a new transition in the assessment of the sphere of Protestant mass media phenomena is evidenced by the expert's conclusion: "Religious activities in the virtual space of Ukrainian priests and parishioners are quite limited compared to Western trends

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<sup>24</sup> D. Elagina. "Leading Websites in Ukraine in October 2020, by Share of Mobile and Desktop Visitors." Statista, 2020. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1184630/most-popular-websites-in-ukraine/>.

<sup>25</sup> Ю. Лавриш, *Церква у нових медіях України: проблеми і пріоритети комунікацій* (Львів: Компанія "Імперіал," 2017). [Yu. Lavrysh, *The Church in the New Media of Ukraine: Problems and Priorities of Communications*. Lviv: Imperial Company].

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> М. Бурдейна, "Використання нових медіа в релігійній комунікації," *Обрії друкарства*, no. 1(6) (2018): 49–57. [M. Burdeina, "The Use of New Media in Religious Communication." *Horizons of printing*].

<sup>28</sup> У. Севастьянив, "Роль интернета в религиозной коммуникации христианских конфессий Украины.," in *Религия и Коммуникация: материалы VI Международной научно-практической конференции, Минск, 18–20 апреля 2019 г.* (Минск: Ковчег, 2019), 230–33. [U. Sevastianiv, "The Role of the Internet in Religious Communication of Christian Confessions of Ukraine." In *Religion and Communication: Proceedings of the VI International Scientific and Practical Conference, Minsk, April 18–20*].

(cyber religions, online confessions, virtual churches, and online worship)."<sup>29</sup> Therefore, today the Internet is perceived as another more global means of communication, which indicates the beginning of the process of virtualized-digitalized-religiosity.<sup>30</sup> This in turn strengthens internal and external communication pathways.

## **Conclusion**

Ukrainian Protestants have found a favorable ground for their activities on the Internet. The Internet performs well as an add-on, an application to offline reality. It is convenient to discuss topics that do not always have a place in other social contexts. In the same way, various minorities, including religious ones, feel comfortable there. The egalitarianism of the Web, the ability to organize a devoted community around the smallest theological and denominational nuances are the attractions of Protestant groups.

In this article, we considered two aspects of Protestant dialogue with digital culture: educational and applied. The educational direction is represented by the ecumenical curriculum in digital theology, initiated by Protestants. This educational center seeks to overcome denominational differences by adopting a common Christian agenda regarding the mission and place of the church in the digital world. The applied aspect is presented by studies on Internet communication of Ukrainian Protestants. Even before the coronavirus pandemic, Internet technologies played a strategic role in the activities of Protestant churches in Ukraine, allowing us to talk about the digitalization of their religiosity, the integral role of digital technologies in church organization, and the impact of digital culture on religious practices.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

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