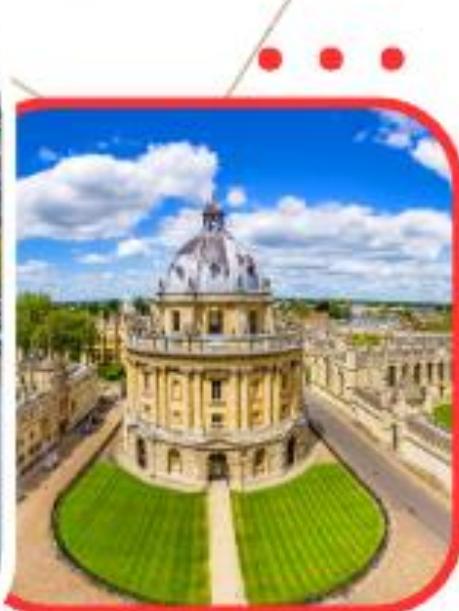




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INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON MULTIDISCIPLINARY STUDIES AND EDUCATION: a collection scientific works of the International scientific conference – London, England, 2025. Issue 4

Languages of publication: **Uzbek, English, Russian, German, Italian, Spanish**

The collection consists of scientific research of scientists, graduate students and students who took part in the International Scientific online conference **«INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON MULTIDISCIPLINARY STUDIES AND EDUCATION»**. Which took place in London , 2025.

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THE MEDIATIZATION OF SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE: BLOG, PODCAST AND STREAMING CULTURE

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Abstract: This article examines how contemporary digital media reshape spiritual experience through blogs, podcasts and streaming culture. Drawing on mediatization theory and the concept of “networked religion,” it argues that spiritual life is increasingly organized through media logics and platform infrastructures rather than only through traditional institutions. Blogs allow believers to narrate spiritual journeys in public, creating archives of “storied identities.” Podcasts offer intimate, portable forms of teaching and testimony that accompany everyday routines. Streaming culture – especially the live broadcasting of religious services and spiritual talks – turns worship into a real-time, interactive event that can be accessed from almost anywhere. Empirical studies show that a significant share of adults now watch religious services online, listen to religion-focused podcasts and use apps for scripture reading, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the digitalization of religion.

Keywords: mediatization of religion; spiritual experience; blogs; podcasts; streaming culture; digital religion; networked religion

Аннотация: В статье анализируется, как современные цифровые медиа трансформируют духовный опыт через блоги, подкасты и культуру стриминга. Опираясь на теорию медиатизации и концепцию «сетевой религии», автор показывает, что духовная жизнь всё больше организуется логикой медиа и цифровых платформ, а не только традиционными религиозными институтами. Блоги позволяют верующим публично рассказывать о своём духовном пути и создавать онлайн-архивы личных историй. Подкасты предлагают интимный и мобильный формат проповеди и свидетельств, сопровождающий повседневные практики. Онлайн-трансляции богослужений и духовных бесед превращают религиозные ритуалы в события реального времени с возможностью интерактивного участия на расстоянии. Эмпирические исследования показывают, что заметная часть взрослых регулярно смотрит религиозные службы онлайн, слушает религиозные подкасты и использует цифровые приложения для чтения священных текстов, особенно после ускоренной цифровизации религии в период пандемии COVID-19.

Ключевые слова: медиатизация религии; духовный опыт; блоги; подкасты; стриминг; цифровая религия; сетевая религия

Annotatsiya: Ushbu maqolada zamonaviy raqamli OAV – bloglar, podkastlar va oqim (stream) madaniyati orqali ma’naviy tajriba qanday





o'zgarayotgani tahlil qilinadi. Mediatizatsiya nazariyasi hamda "tarmoqlashgan din" (networked religion) konsepsiyasiga tayangan holda, ma'naviy hayot tobora ko'proq OAV mantiqi va platformalar infratuzilmasi asosida shakllanayotgani ko'rsatib beriladi. Bloglar mo'minlarga o'z ruhiy izlanishlari haqida omma oldida hikoya qilish, shaxsiy ma'naviy tarixini onlayn arxivlash imkonini beradi. Podkastlar esa kundalik hayot jarayonida eshitiladigan, yaqinlik tuyg'usini beruvchi dars va guvohlik (shahodat) formatini taklif etadi. Diniy marosimlar va ma'rifiy chiqishlarning jonli efirda uzatilishi ibodatni real vaqt rejimidagi, masofadan turib qatnashish mumkin bo'lgan interaktiv hodisaga aylantirmoqda. Tadqiqotlar ko'rsatishicha, COVID-19 pandemiyasi davrida va undan so'ng ko'plab odamlarda onlayn diniy xizmatlarni tomosha qilish, diniy podkastlarni tinglash va oyat o'qishga mo'ljallangan ilovalardan foydalanish odati shakllangan.

Kalit so'zlar : dinning mediatizatsiyasi; ma'naviy tajriba; bloglar; podkastlar; oqim (stream) madaniyati; raqamli din; tarmoqlashgan din

Introduction: In the early decades of the twenty-first century, spiritual life has moved decisively onto screens and into earbuds. Believers and seekers alike write personal testimonies on blogs, binge-listen to spiritual podcasts while commuting, and join live-streamed worship from kitchens, dorm rooms and factory dormitories. Survey data from the United States, for example, indicate that about a quarter of adults regularly watch religious services online or on television, and around 15% listen to religion-focused podcasts. ([Pew Research Center](#)) These practices are no longer marginal; they are part of an ordinary media diet.

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically accelerated this shift. During lockdowns, many religious communities temporarily or permanently transferred worship, study circles and pastoral care to digital platforms. A recent doctoral study by Abdulaziz Altawil shows how worshippers across traditions turned to online media as a "sanctuary space" during the pandemic, using live-streamed services, social media and video platforms to maintain connection with God and community. ([SURFACE](#)) Even as restrictions eased, many of these media practices remained, reshaping expectations about when, where and how spiritual life can be lived.

This article seeks to conceptualize these changes through the lens of mediatization and "networked religion," focusing specifically on three popular formats: blogs, podcasts and streaming. Rather than treating them simply as neutral tools, the article asks:

- How do blogs, podcasts and streaming platforms *re-format* spiritual experience?
- What new opportunities for spiritual growth and community do they create?





- What tensions and risks emerge as spiritual life is subsumed under media logics?

To answer these questions, the article first outlines the theoretical framework of the mediatization of religion and networked religion. It then analyses how spiritual experience is articulated in blogs, podcasts and streaming culture, drawing on existing empirical research and observable practices. Finally, it offers a balanced conclusion that highlights both the positive and negative implications of this mediatized spiritual landscape.

The aim is not to oppose or endorse digital media, but to help scholars, practitioners and religious communities think more clearly about the cultural and spiritual consequences of living faith through blogs, podcasts and streams.

The concept of *mediatization* has become central in understanding how contemporary societies are shaped by media. In his influential article "The Mediatization of Religion: A Theory of the Media as Agents of Religious Change," Stig Hjarvard argues that media are not just channels that transmit religious messages; they have become independent institutions whose logics shape how religion is communicated, imagined and practiced. ([Research Profiles](#))

Hjarvard identifies several key elements of this process:

- Media as primary sources: For many people, media – rather than family or local religious institutions – have become the main source of information about religion and spirituality. ([Research Profiles](#))

- Subordination to media logic: Religious communication adapts to the formats, genres and economic imperatives of media institutions. Sermons become short clips; complex doctrines are packaged into shareable narratives; authority is often measured in likes, followers and views. ([Research Profiles](#))

- Banal religion: Religious symbols and themes circulate in entertainment, advertising and news, producing a diffuse, everyday religiosity that is not necessarily tied to official institutions. ([Research Profiles](#))

From this perspective, blogs, podcasts and streaming services are not simply new tools for old messages. They are environments whose technical and economic structures actively shape what counts as a legitimate spiritual experience and whose voices are heard.

Heidi A. Campbell extends this discussion with the concept of *networked religion*, emerging from her analysis of religion online. ([ResearchGate](#)) In a widely cited article, she argues that digital religious practice exhibits five core traits:

1. Networked community – online religious groups are fluid networks rather than stable, geographically bounded congregations.

2. Storied identities – believers construct and share their spiritual identities through ongoing narratives.





3. Shifting authority – traditional authorities coexist and sometimes compete with new, digitally savvy leaders.

4. Convergent practice – religious practices mix and remix offline and online elements across platforms.

5. Multisite reality – religious life spans physical and digital spaces simultaneously. ([ResearchGate](#))

Blogs, podcasts and streams are prime sites where these traits become visible. A single worshipper might attend a local mosque, follow a spiritual teacher on YouTube, subscribe to interfaith podcasts, and write a personal blog on mystical experiences. Her spiritual life is thus “multi-site” and threaded through networks that transcend institutional boundaries.

Combining Hjarvard’s and Campbell’s approaches, we can say that spiritual experience today is:

increasingly shaped by media logics and platform architectures (mediatization),

and increasingly lived within distributed, digital-physical networks (networked religion).

The next sections explore how this plays out in concrete media formats.

Blogs were among the earliest platforms where ordinary believers could publicly narrate their spiritual lives without formal institutional approval. While blogs have partly given way to social media feeds, they still function as important spaces for long-form reflection and testimony.

Campbell’s notion of *storied identities* is particularly helpful here. ([ResearchGate](#)) Through blog posts, believers craft an ongoing narrative about their doubts, conversions, crises and insights. Unlike traditional spiritual autobiographies that were published once and for all, blogs are open-ended diaries. Comments, likes and shares feed back into how authors understand their own stories.

Typical spiritual blogs include:

- Conversion narratives (for example, documenting a journey from atheism to belief or from one tradition to another);
- Everyday spirituality (reflections on prayer, fasting, mindfulness or ethical dilemmas in daily life);
- Thematic blogs (such as interfaith dialogue, feminist readings of sacred texts, or disability and faith).

These narratives are written for mixed audiences: close friends, anonymous readers, sometimes even imagined critics. This “visible yet distant” public encourages a form of reflective self-presentation. The writer learns to explain inner experiences in ways that are intelligible, attractive and shareable.

Blogs offer several important opportunities for spiritual life:





• Democratization of voice: Individuals who might never preach in a pulpit or lead a class can publish their reflections and be read globally.

• Community across distance: Comment sections and blog networks connect believers who are geographically dispersed or marginalized in their local communities (for example, religious minorities, converts, or LGBTQ+ believers within traditional faiths).

• Interreligious encounter: Spiritual bloggers often read and respond to each other across confessional lines, fostering informal interfaith dialogue.

• Depth and nuance: Unlike short-form social media, blog posts allow for complex argument, storytelling and the inclusion of references to scripture and scholarship.

However, mediatization also introduces risks:

• Individualization and isolation: Spiritual life can become primarily a solo narrative performed in front of an audience, rather than a shared practice within embodied community.

• Performance pressure: Knowing that every post can be liked, shared and archived may subtly push authors toward “marketable” experiences and stylistic choices. Inner life risks becoming content.

• Authority without accountability: Charismatic bloggers can gain considerable influence without formal training or communal oversight. While this can challenge rigid hierarchies, it can also spread misinformation or manipulative teachings.

• Echo chambers: Algorithmic recommendation and self-selection can create ideological bubbles where readers mainly encounter blogs that confirm existing views.

In short, blogs exemplify how mediatized spiritual experience revolves around narrated identity and public storytelling—rich in possibility, but vulnerable to commodification and fragmentation.

If blogs are about writing oneself into visibility, podcasts are about *speaking* into listeners' everyday spaces. They travel with people while they drive, cook, exercise or work, turning everyday routines into opportunities for spiritual reflection.

Pew Research Center data indicate that around 15% of adults in the United States listen to religion-focused podcasts. ([Pew Research Center](#)) Although this is smaller than the proportion viewing online services, it represents millions of regular listeners and reflects the overall growth of podcasting as a medium.

Religious podcasts span a wide range:

- Expository series on sacred texts;
- Interview shows with religious scholars, activists or spiritual teachers;
- Meditative audio for prayer, dhikr, mantra or contemplation;
- Youth-oriented podcasts discussing sexuality, mental health and faith.





Podcasts illustrate Hjarvard's point that *medium and genre* shape how religious messages are constructed and received. ([Research Profiles](#)) Audio encourages a conversational tone, storytelling and soundscapes (music, ambient noise, liturgical chants). Episodes are serialized, creating an ongoing relationship between host and audience.

Key features include:

- **Intimacy:** Listening through headphones creates a sense of one-to-one conversation. Hosts often speak in a direct, confessional style, sharing personal struggles and prayers.
- **Portability:** Spiritual teaching is woven into daily routines; devotion is no longer tied only to sacred times and spaces.
- **Asynchronicity:** Unlike live worship, podcasts can be paused, replayed and shared at will, which supports personal pacing but may also encourage selective consumption.

From the perspective of networked religion, podcasts contribute to shifting authority and convergent practice: listeners may treat a podcast host from another country as a key spiritual guide, sometimes more influential than local leaders. ([ResearchGate](#))

Opportunities:

- **Expanded access to expertise:** Scholars, minoritized traditions and niche spiritualities can reach global audiences without gatekeeping by major broadcasters.
 - **Deep teaching:** Long-form audio permits nuanced engagement with theology, ethics and scripture beyond the limits of short sermons.
 - **Companionship in crisis:** During illness, loneliness or travel, hearing familiar voices can provide continuity of spiritual care.

Risks:

- **Personality-driven faith:** Strong parasocial bonds with hosts may overshadow local communal ties. Spirituality can become centered on particular media personalities.
 - **Information overload:** The sheer number of episodes and shows can produce anxiety about "keeping up," turning spiritual learning into another productivity task.
 - **Commercial entanglements:** Sponsorships, advertising and platform metrics can pressure podcasters to choose topics and styles that maximize growth rather than spiritual depth.

Podcasts thus offer intimate, mobile forms of spiritual connection, but also raise questions about authority, attention and the commercialization of religious teaching.

Streaming culture – especially live video streaming – represents perhaps the most direct mediatization of collective religious practice. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many congregations worldwide turned to platforms like





YouTube, Facebook Live, Instagram, and specialized church or mosque streaming services to broadcast worship. ([SURFACE](#))

Even after the return of in-person gatherings, a significant share of believers continues to watch services online. The Pew survey mentioned earlier shows that many viewers are satisfied with virtual worship and that online participation has become a lasting feature of religious life for a sizable minority. ([Pew Research Center](#))

Streaming culture has several distinctive effects on spiritual practice:

- Real-time participation at a distance: Worshippers can follow services live, respond in chat, post prayer emojis or comments, and sometimes be acknowledged by name by the leader.
- Hybrid gatherings: Many communities run “hybrid” services where in-person and online participants are present simultaneously, creating a multi-site congregation.
- Replay and on-demand access: Services are often recorded and archived, allowing time-shifted worship, revisiting particular sermons or songs, and sharing links with friends.

Altawil’s study, using a uses-and-gratifications framework, shows that such online practices meet needs for continuity of worship, social belonging, emotional support and practical convenience during and after the pandemic. ([SURFACE](#))

Opportunities:

- Inclusion and accessibility: Elderly, disabled, geographically distant or socially anxious believers can participate more fully when physical attendance is difficult.
- Diaspora and minority communities: Migrant believers can follow services from home countries while also engaging local communities, strengthening transnational ties.
- Experimentation with format: Streaming enables creative combinations of music, visuals, chat-based testimony, and multi-site preaching.

Viewed through Campbell’s lens, streaming extends networked community and multisite reality: one can “attend” multiple congregations in a single day, forming overlapping networks of belonging. ([ResearchGate](#))

Risks and tensions

- Spectator worship: Online viewers may slip into a consumer role, “shopping” between services and treating worship as content rather than shared practice.
- Weakening of local bonds: If online viewing replaces physical presence for long periods, it may erode local volunteering, informal care and embodied solidarity.





• Datafication and surveillance: Streaming platforms collect detailed data on viewing habits. In some contexts, this may expose sensitive information about religious identity or political stance.

• Inequality of visibility: Communities with better technical capacity and budgets can produce polished streams that dominate search results, while poorer communities remain largely invisible.

Streaming culture thus powerfully extends the reach of spiritual events, but it also intensifies the influence of platform algorithms, metrics and aesthetics on what worship looks like and who gets seen.

Across blogs, podcasts and streaming, several cross-cutting ambivalences emerge.

Mediatization lowers barriers to entry: almost anyone with a smartphone can share spiritual reflections or lead an online prayer. This democratization can empower lay people, marginalized voices and innovative movements.

At the same time, it can erode trust in traditional sources of authority. Hjarvard notes that media become primary interpreters of religious symbols, weakening institutional control. ([Research Profiles](#)) Campbell similarly observes that networked religion is marked by *shifting authority*, where bloggers, influencers and platform owners play crucial roles in shaping religious discourse. ([ResearchGate](#))

The challenge is to cultivate accountability and discernment without simply re-imposing rigid hierarchies.

Blogs and podcasts can foster deep engagement, long-form reflection and careful study. Streaming can bring entire liturgies into the home. Yet all of this exists within broader attention economies dominated by notifications, multitasking and endless scrolling.

Spiritual content competes with entertainment and advertising on the same feed. Even when the message is profound, the surrounding context may encourage quick consumption rather than contemplation.

Digital media clearly help people stay connected: online prayer groups, comment threads and chat communities can be lifelines, especially for those isolated by health, geography or social stigma. Studies of digital religion repeatedly show that online practices often complement rather than replace offline belonging. ([ResearchGate](#))

However, networked religion can also fragment community into overlapping, volatile networks organized around personal preference. People may curate personalized spiritual ecosystems: a yoga-based meditation podcast here, an evangelical sermon there, a Sufi poetry stream elsewhere. This flexibility can be enriching, but it can also undermine sustained commitment to any one community and blur lines between carefully discerned spiritual practice and mere lifestyle choice.





Mediatization improves access for many, but not for all. Those without stable internet, digital literacy or safe private spaces may be further excluded from spiritual resources that increasingly assume connectivity. Language, accent and production quality can also act as subtle barriers: voices that fit platform norms spread more easily than those that do not.

In short, mediatized spiritual experience is structurally ambivalent. It both extends and constrains, deepens and dilutes – depending on how communities and individuals engage it.

Conclusion: The mediatization of spiritual experience through blogs, podcasts and streaming culture is one of the decisive religious developments of our time. It is not a temporary pandemic improvisation but part of a broader restructuring of religious communication.

Positive dimensions highlighted in this article include:

- Expanded access: People who are sick, disabled, geographically distant or socially marginalized can connect more easily to spiritual communities and teachings.
- Democratized expression: Ordinary believers can share testimonies, interpretations and creative forms of worship without waiting for institutional approval.
- Intercultural encounter: Digital networks facilitate contact between traditions, enabling comparative learning, interfaith dialogue and new coalitions.
- Flexible and portable practice: Podcasts and streams allow spiritual reflection to accompany daily routines, integrating faith into work, family life and travel.
- Innovation and experimentation: Communities can experiment with new liturgical forms, storytelling techniques and educational models that may renew spiritual traditions.

At the same time, negative or risky dimensions are significant:

- Commercialization and platform dependence: Spiritual life becomes entangled with corporate platforms whose priorities are profit and engagement, not holiness or truth.
- Authority crises: The proliferation of voices can confuse seekers, de-legitimize responsible leadership and magnify sensational or polarizing figures. ([Research Profiles](#))
- Superficiality and distraction: The constant flow of content can encourage quick consumption rather than disciplined practice, silence and deep study.
- Fragmentation of belonging: Networked religion can loosen stable commitments, encouraging a “pick-and-mix” spirituality that may struggle to sustain long-term ethical and communal responsibilities. ([ResearchGate](#))





- Digital inequality: Those without adequate connectivity or skills risk being left behind as more religious life moves online.

Taken together, these factors suggest that mediatization is neither a threat to be rejected nor a miracle solution to be embraced uncritically. It is an environment to be navigated.

For religious communities, scholars and media practitioners, several practical implications follow:

1. Develop critical media literacy: Teach believers not only *how* to use digital tools, but *how these tools shape them* – emotionally, theologically and socially.

2. Design for participation, not just consumption: Encourage interactive formats (discussion, Q&A, small groups) that foster mutual recognition rather than one-way broadcasting.

3. Strengthen links between online and offline life: Intentionally connect digital participation to embodied practices of service, care and local commitment.

4. Reflect on ethics and data: Consider the privacy, surveillance and commercialization aspects of platforms used for spiritual communication.

Future research could explore in more detail how specific communities – for example, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Christian or non-institutional spiritual groups – differently appropriate blogs, podcasts and streaming. Comparative studies across regions and generations would further clarify how mediatization intersects with social inequalities, political contexts and cultural histories.

In conclusion, the mediatization of spiritual experience via blog, podcast and streaming culture marks a profound transformation in how people seek, narrate and share the sacred. It offers remarkable new pathways toward meaning and connection, yet it also demands careful discernment, critical reflection and creative, responsible practice.

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