

Digital Emancipation or Digital Reconfiguration? Mediatization of Religion and the Rise of Church-Owned Platforms during and after COVID-19

Francis Wachira¹, Lydia Radoli², Agneta Alubala³

¹Daystar University
wachiraprof@gmail.com

²Daystar University
lradoli@daystar.ac.ke

³Daystar University
agnetaalubala@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the relationship between media and religion, with particular focus on how the crisis accelerated shifts in religious mediatization. Prior to the pandemic, access to mass audiences was largely mediated by secular media systems characterized by commodification, in which visibility was often contingent on financial capacity and dominated by a limited number of prominent televangelists. This study argues that the pandemic disrupted this model by compelling religious institutions to develop and adopt their own digital communication infrastructures, marking a shift toward partial platform autonomy. Drawing on mediatization theory, the study conceptualizes this transition as a form of digital emancipation, whereby religious organizations reduce their dependence on traditional media gatekeepers and expand their capacity to engage audiences directly. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study analyzes audience data and engagement metrics from Christ Is the Answer Ministries (CITAM) Church Online platform, alongside institutional reports on reach and impact during and after pandemic-related restrictions. Findings indicate a gradual but sustained increase in online participation, coupled with significant global reach, suggesting the normalization of digitally mediated worship and the emergence of interactive digital

congregations. However, the study also finds that this shift introduces new dynamics shaped by platform logics, audience expectations, and production demands. The paper concludes that while COVID-19 catalyzed a move toward greater communicative autonomy for religious institutions, this transformation represents not a complete rupture from mediatization, but a reconfiguration of it within digital environments.

Keywords: Electronic pulpits, secular media, religious mediatization, media space

Introduction

From the onset, one needs to differentiate between two key concepts: "mediatization of religion" and "religious mediatization." The former encompasses the influence of both religious and secular media on religious matters, which Kigame (2021) characterized as a marriage between the secular media and religion, so interwoven that sometimes one cannot tell the difference. The latter specifically pertains to mediatization stemming exclusively from religious media. Religious mediatization encompasses religious discourse and various symbolic domains (art, science, economics, politics, etc.) within the public sphere (Tudor et al., 2021). This paper examines the impact of religious mediatization when Christ is the Answer Ministries introduced the CITAM Church Online (CCO), coinciding with the specific measures introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In response to containment measures mandated by the government through the Ministry of Health, an immediate order was issued to close churches. This decision was prompted by a concerning twofold surge in COVID-19 cases during the same period (Maina, 2020). Following this abrupt closure, churches were compelled to devise alternative engagement strategies swiftly to maintain connections with their members (Lorea et al., 2022). The unexpected closure meant churches had to pivot

rapidly to remain pertinent and active. The sudden closure exerted immense pressure on the secular media, creating an environment where media outlets sought to capitalize on the heightened demand for airtime. This increased demand allowed media entities to commodify airtime, auctioning it off to the highest bidder, thereby providing the media industry with a unique advantage and leverage under the notion that 'we are in this together' (Atal & Richey, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered an unparalleled shift in how religious practices were conducted worldwide, compelling a surge in the mediatization of religion. Religious institutions swiftly adapted to the challenges posed by restrictions on physical gatherings by embracing digital technologies and online platforms to sustain their engagement with congregations (Lorea et al., 2022). This global shift influenced the religious landscape, fundamentally altering how faith was practiced and experienced during the pandemic. One of the most noticeable shifts was the virtualization of religious services. The closure of physical religious spaces prompted a rapid transition to online platforms for conducting prayers, sermons, and religious ceremonies, with live streaming and pre-recorded sessions becoming the norm (Campbell, 2023a). In American churches, church leaders had to learn how to manage a digital divide within their congregations.

The COVID-19 pandemic starkly exposed the digital divide within congregations, highlighting disparities in internet access, generational differences in technology adoption, and a prior reluctance among religious communities to invest in digital infrastructure. These inequalities have persisted, with some churches continuing to face challenges related to limited connectivity, inadequate infrastructure, and the high cost of digital access.

However, churches that embraced digital worship services also encountered

unexpected opportunities that, in part, mitigated these challenges. The shift to online platforms enabled them to reach broader and more geographically dispersed audiences, often surpassing pre-pandemic attendance boundaries. Church leaders observed that digital services facilitated reconnection with members who had relocated, while also enhancing engagement with homebound congregants, thereby fostering renewed forms of community and social connection (Hall & Kołodziejska, 2021).

Importantly, the transition revealed adaptive dynamics within congregations. Elderly members, despite initial barriers, demonstrated a willingness to learn and participate in digital worship, while younger congregants played a crucial role in bridging the generational divide by offering technical support. These interactions not only enabled continuity of worship but also strengthened intergenerational cohesion within church communities.

Beyond its immediate function as a response to gathering restrictions, the expansion of online worship can be understood through the lens of digital justice (Campbell, 2023a). While accommodating digitally reluctant congregants remains important, an overemphasis on resistance to technological adoption risks reinforcing existing inequalities. Consequently, addressing the digital divide requires deliberate and sustained strategies that position digital engagement not as a temporary adjustment, but as an integral and enduring component of contemporary religious practice.

Evidence from multiple countries across different regions, including the United States, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Italy, and South Africa, shows that this transition enabled broader reach and greater inclusivity, breaking geographical barriers and developing a sense of global religious community. Additionally, the

online space facilitated interfaith dialogue and collaboration. Different religious groups seized the opportunity to organize joint events, discussions, and prayers, promoting unity, understanding, and solidarity during these trying times (Sisti et al., 2023). Religious leaders and organizations leveraged social media, podcasts, webinars, and other digital mediums to convey messages of hope, guidance, and support to their communities, emphasizing the importance of effective digital communication for religious organizations (Heuva, 2022). Moreover, digital platforms became vital for fundraising and financial sustainability. Religious organizations turned to online donations, virtual fundraising events, and digital campaigns to ensure continued financial support, which is crucial for their operations and community services.

In Indonesia, for example, the mediation effect was evident during the pandemic through a double-pronged strategy involving both social presence and online religious donations (Aji & Muslichah, 2022). The shift to online platforms also played a critical role in fostering engagement and community building. Virtual gatherings, prayer meetings, and online study groups helped maintain a sense of community and provided much-needed emotional and spiritual support during a challenging time (Maina, 2020).

However, this rapid digitization of religious practices was not without its challenges. Concerns about privacy, misinformation, and authenticity emerged, highlighting the need for religious organizations to navigate these challenges while upholding the integrity and authenticity of their message (Maina, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst, expediting the mediatization of religion globally. This shift to digital platforms is likely to have a lasting impact, influencing how religion is practiced and experienced even beyond the pandemic, with digital

mediums becoming an integral part of religious life (Maina, 2020).

The media's role as a dynamic marketplace influences the supply of religious content, making spirituality and religiosity more accessible beyond formal religious institutions. This shift towards online presence supplants the traditional role of formal religious establishments as the primary source of religious information (Kigame, 2021). As such, this creates pressure from both the religion and the media itself: the religion has to compete for available space within the media, and the media has to balance its commercial interests with the religion's needs while managing its audience (Wachira, 2021).

Statement of the Problem

The commodification of mediatized religion by secular media has persisted over time and remains a significant concern in contemporary society. This phenomenon is characterized by the commercialization and selective representation of religious figures and beliefs, often resulting in a narrow and imbalanced portrayal of religious diversity. Historically, the media have played a central role in shaping public perceptions of religion; however, this representation has rarely been neutral. Instead, a limited number of prominent televangelists and religious figures are consistently granted access to large audiences, while others remain marginalized or excluded (Kigame, 2021). Such selective visibility risks distorting public understanding and reinforcing simplified or stereotypical representations of religious traditions.

Media selection processes are frequently driven by considerations of marketability, sensationalism, and profitability (Atal & Richey, 2021). As a result, charismatic figures with compelling narratives tend to dominate airtime, whereas less prominent or less commercially appealing voices struggle to gain access. This dynamic not only narrows the spectrum of religious representation but also reinforces

structural inequalities, where access to audiences is contingent upon financial and symbolic capital. Consequently, media exposure can create the impression that a few visible actors represent entire religious traditions, obscuring the diversity that exists within them.

While this pattern of unequal access has been widely acknowledged, less attention has been paid to how it has been reconfigured in contexts of crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted traditional modes of religious communication by restricting physical gatherings (Maina, 2020) and intensifying reliance on mediated forms of engagement (Lorea et al., 2022). In response, many religious institutions developed and adopted their own digital platforms, enabling more direct interaction with their audiences (Campbell, 2023a).

This shift raises important questions about the extent to which digital platforms have altered existing structures of mediation. Specifically, it remains unclear whether the move toward institutionally managed digital platforms represents a form of digital emancipation from traditional media gatekeeping, or whether it constitutes a reconfiguration of mediatization within new platform-dependent environments (Tudor et al., 2021). This study addresses this gap by examining the rise of electronic pulpits and digital congregations through the case of Christ Is the Answer Ministries (CITAM) Church Online.

Literature Review

1. Mediatization Theory

Mediatization theory provides a framework for understanding the evolving relationship between media and religion, particularly in contexts where communication technologies shape institutional practices and social interaction. Mediatization refers to the process through which social institutions and cultural

practices become increasingly influenced by media logics, formats, and infrastructures (Stig Hjarvard, 2008; Andreas Hepp, 2013). In this perspective, media are not treated as neutral channels of communication but as structures that influence how institutions operate, how meaning is constructed, and how audiences engage with content.

In the study of religion, mediatization has been used to explain how religious authority, practice, and representation are shaped through interaction with media systems. Hjarvard (2008) distinguishes between the mediatization of religion and religious mediatization. The mediatization of religion refers to situations in which secular media shape religious representations. Religious mediatization refers to the processes through which religious actors adopt and incorporate media logics into their communication practices. In the first case, religion is subject to the norms and values of mainstream media institutions, which may result in selective representation, simplification, or commodification. In the second case, religious institutions engage directly with media technologies and produce content that reflects contemporary media environments.

This distinction is relevant for understanding the transformation of religious communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, access to mass audiences was often mediated by secular media systems, in which religious visibility was shaped by commercial considerations such as marketability, audience appeal, and profitability. Media institutions served as gatekeepers, often privileging certain religious voices while excluding others. This reflects the operation of media logic, where institutional practices are shaped by the norms and routines of media systems (Altheide & Snow, 1979; Hjarvard, 2008).

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted these patterns by restricting physical

gatherings and requiring religious institutions to adopt digital communication platforms. This shift can be understood as a movement from externally driven mediatization to a more internally managed form of religious mediatization. By using livestream services, social media platforms, and dedicated online portals, religious organizations were able to engage directly with their audiences without relying on traditional media gatekeepers. This development reflects an increase in institutional control over communication processes.

However, this shift does not imply complete autonomy. Mediatization theory emphasizes that institutions remain embedded within broader media environments (Hepp, 2013). Religious organizations operating through digital platforms are still shaped by platform-specific logics, including algorithmic visibility, audience interaction, and expectations regarding production quality. As a result, the transition to digital platforms represents a reconfiguration rather than a departure from mediatization. Religious practices continue to be shaped by media environments, although the locus of control has shifted.

In this study, mediatization theory provides a lens for interpreting the emergence of electronic pulpits and digital congregations. The case of CITAM Church Online illustrates how religious institutions have adopted media-oriented forms of engagement while maintaining core religious functions. Patterns of audience growth and interactive participation suggest the incorporation of media logic into religious practice, indicating the continued relevance of mediatization theory in the analysis of contemporary religious communication.

2. Commodification of Media Space and Access to Audience

Throughout history, religious communities have sought ways to share their

beliefs, teachings, and practices with a broader audience. The evolution of media has significantly impacted how religious content is accessed and disseminated, facilitating a deeper connection between religious organizations and their congregations. This essay delves into the historical journey and contemporary landscape of media access for religious programming, reflecting on the challenges faced and the potential future trajectories of this evolving relationship (Kigame, 2021). The mediatization of religion can be historically traced to the advent of the printing press (Morgan, 2011). This technological leap marked the early stages of religious communication through media. As technology progressed, so did the modes of dissemination. The emergence of radio and television brought about a revolutionary shift, enabling religious organizations to broadcast sermons, hymns, and discussions, reaching a broader audience (Kay, 2009).

Television and radio emerged as powerful media for religious programming, shaping the way people accessed spiritual content (Hoover, 2025). The power of visual and auditory storytelling enhanced engagement, bringing the religious experience into people's homes. Families could gather around the radio or TV to participate in religious events and teachings, transcending physical barriers. The advent of the internet catapulted religious programming into an era of unprecedented accessibility (Mudau & Tshifhumulo, 2025). Online platforms, streaming services, podcasts, and social media became conduits for religious content. Congregants could access sermons, religious literature, and live events from anywhere, at any time. The internet promoted a sense of community, allowing believers to engage in discussions, share insights, and participate in virtual religious gatherings (Hutchings, 2011). However, despite the immense opportunities the digital age presented, challenges persisted. The digital divide, characterized by disparities in internet access and digital

literacy, emerged as a significant obstacle (Raihan et al., 2025). Economic constraints, geographic location, and a lack of technological infrastructure contributed to unequal access to religious content. Bridging this gap became imperative to ensure inclusivity in the digital religious sphere (Fahm, 2025).

The use of broadcast media has become widespread in both Church ministry and Christian interdenominational outreach in the United States of America, dating back to the advent of radio in the 1930s. This practice is commonly referred to as "televangelism," which is defined as a ministry that employs broadcast media to disseminate religious teachings (Trihastutie, 2019). Televangelism gained prominence, especially as television networks and cable TV became accessible to a broad segment of the population, primarily those who could afford them. The roots of televangelism in the United States can be traced back to the 1950s, when it became a well-established practice.

Furthermore, Trihastutie argued that, in the era of globalization, American televangelism has harnessed international broadcast networks to reach a global audience. The media, with its far-reaching influence and power of publicity, has played a pivotal role in negotiating religion within the public sphere (Trihastutie, 2019). It serves as a vehicle for conveying religious arguments and narratives, effectively bridging the sacred and the profane spaces. The media has evolved into a transformative tool, altering traditional evangelistic practices to adopt technology-based approaches. This shift has allowed religious outreach to adapt to the ever-changing landscape of popular culture. Televangelism, by embracing media platforms, has tapped into contemporary society's trends and preferences, ensuring that religious teachings and practices remain relevant and accessible to a broad, diverse audience.

In a pre-pandemic study conducted by Karanja in 2019, a notable trend

emerged: the growing commercialization of religion through the vehicle of televangelism in Kenya. This phenomenon had gained momentum, with charismatic preachers emerging as prominent figures dominating the airwaves. Among these influential figures were Bishop Mark Kariuki of the Deliverance Church, Pius Muiru from the Maximum Miracle Center, and Bishop Maina Nganga, known for his Neno Evangelism Center. These programs had a prominent presence on major television networks, including KBC (Pastor Muiru was available on both KBC radio and TV) and KTN, as well as on other faith-based channels such as SAYARE TV and GBS. The establishment of these faith-centric channels was directly prompted by the digital broadcast protocol, which catalyzed the expansion of Kenya's religious programming landscape, as previously noted by Karanja (2019). This shift in media access allowed these charismatic preachers to reach an increasingly broader audience, influencing and engaging with their congregations on a scale previously unattainable.

Methods

This study examines the mediatization of religion during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the emergence of electronic pulpits and digital congregations. A mixed-methods approach was employed, integrating quantitative analysis of audience metrics with qualitative analysis of audience engagement.

The quantitative component involved analyzing audience data from the CITAM Church Online (CCO) platform. Attendance figures were examined over two key periods: the first three months after the government directive to suspend in-person church services, and the first three months after the resumption of in-person gatherings. These timeframes were selected to enable comparison between initial digital adoption and subsequent engagement patterns.

The qualitative component consisted of a content analysis of audience

comments collected from online services during the same periods. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select comments that were relevant to audience engagement, user experience, and perceptions of worship quality. The sampled comments were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns in participants' experiences and evaluations of digital worship.

CITAM Church Online was selected as a case study due to its structured digital platform and the availability of institutional data on audience reach and participation. The platform provides a range of services, including livestreamed worship, midweek services, and interactive sessions, allowing for the examination of both quantitative participation trends and qualitative audience interaction within a single institutional context.

Results

The findings indicate that the initial adoption of online church services among congregants was relatively low. The first recorded online service in April 2020 attracted only 896 viewers, suggesting that a significant portion of congregants had not yet fully embraced digital worship. This early hesitation may be attributed to unfamiliarity with online platforms, limited access to digital devices or internet connectivity, or a preference for traditional in-person worship experiences. However, attendance data demonstrates a steady upward trajectory over time. By May 2020, average Sunday service viewership had risen to over 1,000 viewers per family service. This growth coincided with the enforcement and continuation of COVID-19 containment measures, which restricted physical gatherings and necessitated alternative forms of religious engagement. The gradual increase in viewership suggests a learning and adaptation process among congregants, whereby repeated exposure and necessity fostered acceptance of online worship as a viable substitute for

physical church services.

Overall, the attendance trend reflects a transition phase in which initial resistance or uncertainty gave way to increased participation, highlighting the role of external circumstances in accelerating digital adoption within faith-based communities.

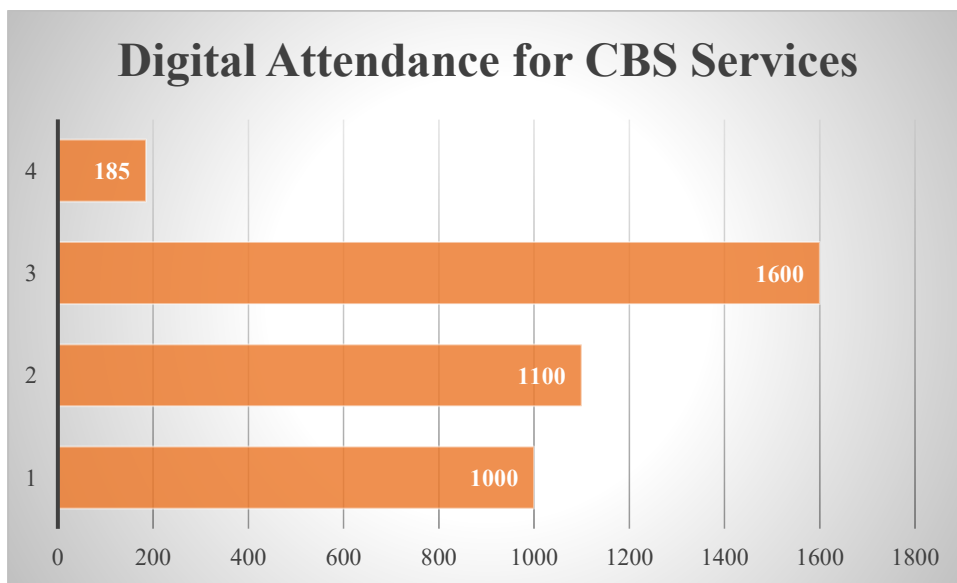


Figure 1: CCO online attendance as of May 2020

Source; YouTube

From the graph above, it is evident that the number slowly increased during the initial months of the containment measures. Note that the number was staggering at 800 at the start, averaging over 1,000 viewers per family service. CITAM's report during the 2020 Annual General Meeting noted that the platform had an impact and reached over 23 million people. The report reads in part:

Through digital migration, the world has inadvertently shifted to cyberspace. If we are to impact today's generation, we must join them where they live – online. At the last AGM, we officially launched CITAM Church Online, which has served as a valuable tool to amplify the gospel message across multiple

social media platforms. This cyber-church has reached over 23 million people in 48 nations in just one year. (CITAM AGM Report, 2020)

Beyond local attendance figures, institutional data points to a significantly broader impact of digital ministry. According to reports presented at the 2020 Annual General Meeting of Christ Is The Answer Ministries, the Church Online platform reached over 23 million people in 48 countries in a single year. This level of reach represents a substantial expansion beyond the traditional physical congregation and illustrates the scalability of digital platforms for religious outreach.

The contrast between the modest early online attendance figures and the reported global reach underscores the transformative potential of digital migration. While early engagement reflected cautious participation by existing congregants, the online platform enabled access by audiences who may not have previously interacted with CITAM services due to geographical, logistical, or cultural barriers. The findings, therefore, demonstrate that online church platforms function not only as continuity mechanisms during crises but also as strategic tools for global evangelism.

The AGM statement explicitly frames digital migration as a necessary response to changing societal patterns, emphasizing that effective ministry requires engaging audiences in the spaces they increasingly inhabit; namely, online environments. This institutional acknowledgment reinforces the legitimacy and strategic importance of digital church as a long-term ministry model rather than a temporary response to the pandemic.

Analysis of viewer comments during this period reveals predominantly positive audience perceptions of the online services. A substantial number of comments from the livestreams expressed appreciation for sermon content and pastoral leadership, with descriptors such as “timely word,” “powerful message,” and

expressions of gratitude to God and the pastors. This suggests that the core spiritual content of the services resonated strongly with viewers despite the absence of physical interaction.

Worship elements, particularly performances by the Men's Chorale, also received significant praise. Comments highlighted the quality of worship, presentation, and musical delivery, indicating that music remained a meaningful component of the worship experience in the online format. Such feedback suggests that well-executed worship music can effectively translate into digital spaces and maintain congregational engagement.

Additionally, viewers expressed appreciation for the efforts of the CITAM technical and media teams. Comments acknowledging sensitivity to feedback and the ability to broadcast effectively to a global audience reflect recognition of the behind-the-scenes work required to deliver consistent online services. This dimension of feedback highlights the visibility and perceived importance of production quality in digital worship environments.

Positive Feedback on Sermons and Pastors: Several comments express gratitude and appreciation for the sermon and the pastors. Words like "timely word," "God bless you," and "take all the praise" indicate that the audience found the message's content and delivery impactful.

Praise for the Men's Chorale and Worship: Some comments specifically commend the Men's Chorale and their performance. Phrases like "Great worship and presentation" and "Lovely and powerful sermon" highlight the positive reception of the music and worship aspect of the service.

Appreciation for the CITAM Team: A comment expresses thanks to the CITAM team, recognizing their efforts in delivering the online service. This feedback

acknowledges the team's sensitivity to feedback and their role in broadcasting to a global audience during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Encouragement for Improvement in Music Leadership: Constructive feedback is provided on the music and singing, suggesting that sopranos should lead, and a call for more originality and genuineness in worship music. The comment also addresses the need for constructive feedback and growth.

Positive Reactions: Several short comments simply express agreement and positivity, using phrases like "Amen," "Great foundation," and "Amen amen."

Emphasis on Modulation and Technical Aspects: A comment appreciates the modulation, possibly alluding to the technical aspects of the online service, suggesting a keen ear for the broadcast's quality.

Constructive Feedback and Engagement Quality

While feedback was largely positive, some comments offered constructive criticism, particularly concerning music leadership and worship execution.

Suggestions included clearer vocal leadership, greater originality, and greater authenticity in worship music. Such critiques indicate that viewers were not merely passive recipients but active evaluators of the worship experience.

Other comments referenced technical aspects such as modulation and sound quality, suggesting that viewers paid attention to production details. This attention to technical quality reflects heightened expectations associated with digital content consumption, where audiences are accustomed to professionally produced online media.

Importantly, the presence of both affirming and critical feedback suggests a high level of audience engagement. Rather than disengaging, viewers demonstrated investment in the improvement and growth of the online services. This interactive feedback loop is indicative of an emerging digital congregation that values excellence,

responsiveness, and continuous enhancement of online worship experiences. The AGM report, on the report from the missions department, further revealed:

We are grateful for the impact of CITAM Church Online, which has enabled many people across continents to hear the gospel on their mobile phones, iPads, and tablets. We are committed to being as innovative as possible to reach as many people as possible with the gospel while it is still day. We are confident that we are on course in our mission of knowing God and making Him known through evangelism and discipleship (CITAM AGM Report, 2020).

The statement celebrates the positive impact of CITAM Church Online, reaffirms a commitment to innovation, and emphasizes the central role of digital platforms in advancing the mission of evangelism and discipleship. It reflects an awareness of the evolving nature of outreach in a digital age.

Discussion

The findings from CITAM Church Online point to a significant shift in the organization of religious communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. The observed growth in online participation and the expansion of global reach suggest that digital platforms became central to sustaining and extending religious engagement beyond the constraints of physical gatherings. This pattern is consistent with broader observations that religious institutions increasingly adopted digital technologies to maintain continuity of worship and community during the pandemic (Sulkowski & Ignatowski, 2020).

From a mediatization perspective, these findings reflect a transition in how religious communication is structured and delivered. Prior to the pandemic, access to large audiences was often mediated through traditional media systems, where

visibility was shaped by commercial and institutional gatekeeping. The shift to church-managed digital platforms indicates a movement toward greater institutional control over communication processes, allowing religious organizations to engage directly with their audiences.

This transition can be understood as a form of digital emancipation, in which religious institutions reduce reliance on external media infrastructures. The CITAM case illustrates how platform ownership enabled the expansion of reach and the development of new forms of engagement, including interactive participation through comments and live sessions. These features suggest the emergence of a more participatory model of religious communication, where audiences are not only recipients but also contributors to the worship experience.

However, this shift does not represent a complete departure from mediatization. The analysis of audience feedback indicates that digital worship is shaped by expectations associated with online media environments, including attention to production quality, sound, and presentation. These expectations reflect the influence of platform-specific logics, which continue to structure how religious content is produced and evaluated. In this sense, the move to digital platforms represents a reconfiguration of mediatization rather than its absence.

The findings suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated an ongoing transformation in religious communication. While digital platforms provided opportunities for increased reach and engagement, they also introduced new dynamics that require religious institutions to adapt to evolving media environments. The case of CITAM Church Online, therefore, illustrates both the possibilities and the constraints associated with the mediatization of religion in a digital context.

Conclusion

This study examined the transformation of religious communication during and after the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of mediatization, with particular attention to the emergence of electronic pulpits and digital congregations. The findings indicate that the pandemic acted as a critical catalyst in accelerating the adoption of digital platforms by religious institutions. In the case of Christ Is the Answer Ministries (CITAM) Church Online, this shift was reflected in increased audience participation, expanded geographic reach, and the development of interactive engagement.

The findings suggest that this transition represents a movement toward greater institutional control over communication processes, as religious organizations reduced their reliance on traditional media gatekeepers. This development can be understood as a form of digital emancipation, enabling direct engagement with audiences and extending religious practice beyond physical space. At the same time, this shift does not signal a departure from mediatization. Rather, it reflects a reconfiguration in which religious communication is increasingly shaped by the logics of digital platforms, including audience interactivity, visibility dynamics, and expectations of production quality.

The study contributes to mediatization scholarship by demonstrating how crisis conditions can accelerate changes in the relationship between media and religion, leading to new forms of institutionally managed digital mediation. While digital platforms expand opportunities for access and engagement, they also introduce new constraints that continue to shape religious practice in mediated environments.

Overall, the findings indicate that the digital church is likely to remain an integral component of contemporary religious life. Future research may build on this

study by examining comparative cases across different religious contexts and by exploring the long-term implications of platform-dependent religious communication.

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