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Evangelizing on YouTube – a Case Study of the *Dominikanie Szczecin* Channel in 2020

ABSTRACT

The text is a result of a research project titled “The significance of parish-distributed press for the evangelization and formation activities of the Szczecin-Kamień Church (2016–2020).” The project was realized by members of the Department of Media Evangelism of the Institute of Journalism as part of the basic statutory activity of the Faculty of Philosophy of the Jesuit University Ignatianum in Krakow. The article touches on the use of YouTube in the work of evangelization by the Dominicans of the Roman Catholic Parish of St. Dominic in Szczecin in 2020, when, due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, for many of the faithful, online media was the primary way to stay in touch with clergy and attend Mass.

KEYWORDS: YouTube evangelism, Catholic media, Catholics, Dominicans, COVID-19 pandemic

STRESZCZENIE

Ewangelizacja na YouTube – studium przypadku kanału *Dominikanie Szczecin* w 2020 roku

Tekst jest efektem projektu badawczego pt. „Znaczenie prasy kolportowanej w parafiach dla działalności ewangelizacyjnej i formacyjnej Kościoła szczecińsko-kamińskiego (2016–2020)”. Projekt został zrealizowany przez członków Katedry Ewangelizacji Medialnej Instytutu Dziennikarstwa w ramach podstawowej działalności statutowej Wydziału Filozoficznego Akademii Ignatianum w Krakowie. Artykuł porusza tematykę wykorzystania YouTube w dziele ewangelizacji przez dominikanów z Parafii Rzymskokatolickiej pw. św. Dominika w Szczecinie w 2020 r., gdy z powodu wybuchu pandemii COVID-19 dla wielu wiernych media internetowe stały się podstawowym sposobem na utrzymanie kontaktu z duchownymi oraz uczestnictwo we mszach świętych.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: ewangelizacja na YouTube, media katolickie, katolicy, dominikanie, pandemia COVID-19

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Introduction

Already at the end of the twentieth century, reflecting after the Second Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on Europe,¹ Bishop Adam Lepa noted that “new media and modern information technologies should be introduced into evangelization. Therefore, it is necessary to bet on the Internet, using it even more extensively in evangelization activities” (Lepa, 1999). The importance of the Internet for evangelization was also emphasized by Pope John Paul II who, appealing in his Message for the XXXVI World Media Day 2002, said: “I dare to summon the whole Church bravely to cross this new threshold, to put out into the deep of the Net, so that now as in the past the great engagement of the Gospel and culture may show to the world ‘the glory of God on the face of Christ’ (2 Cor 4:6)” (John Paul II, 2002).

The call for evangelization on the Internet – which has resulted in the creation of Catholic online media, at such a pace that, describing it, Bogdan Giemza, S.D.S., said: “One can even speak of an explosion in the Internet use in the Church” (Giemza, 2005, p. 408) – has also been answered by the Dominicans of the Roman Catholic Parish of St. Dominic in Szczecin (and the St. Dominic Monastery of the Dominican Fathers in Szczecin). They have established a website (according to the Internet Archive, <https://szczecin.dominikanie.pl/> existed already in 2004), Facebook accounts (since 2013, at <https://www.facebook.com/Dominikanie.Szczecin>) and Twitter (since 2016, at https://twitter.com/OP_Szczecin), and also shared audio recordings on SoundCloud (at <https://soundcloud.com/dominikanie-szczecin>).

However, in March 2020, as COVID-19 restrictions were being introduced,² as noted by Ewa Stachowska, “they made religious practice impossible in traditional public, community spaces” (2020, p. 112), the Szczecin preachers decided to enrich their *owned media* by adding a YouTube channel, *Dominikanie Szczecin*.

It should be noted that the potential of YouTube was recognized by Catholic clergy even before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic; not only conducting proselytizing activities, but also providing advice to those interested. A kind of instruction manual was prepared, for example, by Fr. Mirosław Chmielewski, C.Ss.R. (2014), in which he hinted that

1 The Second Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on Europe was held Oct. 1–23, 1999.

2 The COVID-19 pandemic – on 11 March 2020, WHO announced the COVID-19 pandemic. In Poland, the first restrictions were introduced on March 10, and an epidemiological emergency was imposed on March 14. On March 20, 2020, Poland’s prime minister officially declared an epidemic.

evangelism on YouTube can be carried out by, among other things, setting up a channel, publishing sermons or commenting on Sunday sermons.

Nor was the entry of the Szczecin Dominicans into the world of YouTube, which they refer to as “the largest virtual pulpit in the world” (<https://www.youtube.com/@Dominikanieplportal/about>) a phenomenon in terms of the YouTube activity of Polish Dominicans. As they stress, “The active presence of Dominicans on the Internet is part of an eight-century-long tradition of preaching the Gospel <to everyone, everywhere and in every possible way>” (<https://www.youtube.com/@Dominikanieplportal/about>). Although the official channel of the Polish Dominicans, *Dominikanie.pl* (<https://www.youtube.com/@Dominikanieplportal>), was created in 2017, the opportunity of realizing the mission of the order on this popular platform had been noticed much earlier by, among others, the Dominicans from Służew, who have been running their channel, *Dominikanie Służew* (<https://www.youtube.com/@dominikanie.sluzew/about>), since 2011, Fr. Adam Szustak, O.P., who has been sharing “retreats, biblical commentaries and other preaching video projects” on his popular channel called *Langusta na palmie* (<https://www.youtube.com/@Langustanapalmie/about>, cf. more in: Gronkowska 2018) since 2012, or the Rzeszów fathers, who in 2015 established the *Dominikanie Rzeszów* channel (<https://www.youtube.com/@DominikanieRzeszowLIVE/about>). Then, following their confreres, the Wrocław Dominicans established their YouTube channel, *Dominikanie we Wrocławiu* (<https://www.youtube.com/@DominikanieweWroclawiu/about>) in 2019, as did the Lublin Dominicans at *Dominikanie Lublin* (<https://www.youtube.com/@DominikanieLublinYT/about>).

What is more, 2020 went down in the history of online Dominican activity as a record year in terms of the number of newly created channels of Dominican monasteries in Poland. Already in March 2020, the following channels emerged: *Dominikanie Poznań* (<https://www.youtube.com/@DominikaniePoznanOP/about>), *Dominikanie Kraków* (<https://www.youtube.com/@dominikaniekrakow4524/about>), *Dominikanie Gdańsk* (<https://www.youtube.com/@DominikanieGdanskOnline/about>), *Dominikanie Freta* (<https://www.youtube.com/@DominikanieFreta10/about>), *Dominikanie Katowice* (<https://www.youtube.com/@dominikaniekatowice3026/about>), *Dominikanie Sandomierz* (<https://www.youtube.com/@dominikaniesandomierz5499/about>); who were joined by *Dominikanie Korbiełów* (<https://www.youtube.com/@dominikaniekorbielow7937/about>) in April; *Dominikanie Tarnobrzeg* (<https://www.youtube.com/@dominikanietarnobrzeg737/about>) in May; and *Dominikanie Łódź* (<https://www.youtube.com/@dominikanieodz5926>) in September.

The well-known YouTube activity of Dominicans, including through the aforementioned Fr. Adam Szustak, O.P., or the intensification of the creation of YouTube channels in the year of the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak, are extremely interesting research topics. However, due to the fact that the article has been created under a project titled „The significance of parish-distributed press for the evangelization and formation activities of the Szczecin-Kamień Church (2016–2020),” it was a natural choice to select the channel created in March of 2020, which belongs to the preachers serving in the city of Szczecin, the seat of the Szczecin-Kamień Archdiocese.

The Szczecin Dominicans set up their channel in such a way that, among other things, sermons, commentaries on the Gospel were available to any YouTube user (sometimes a random online visitor, interested in a short video and evaluation thereof by giving a thumbs-up or down), but, for example, broadcasts of funeral Masses or rosary services – have been made available to a select few (e.g., the access was possible for members of the community centered around the Facebook community, where they shared links).

The area of interest to me was the one in which diverse, accessible material was published, which made the subject of the study the content of the channel available to every YouTube user, made available by the *Dominikanie Szczecin* channel from March to November 2020; that is, during the first year of the pandemic and also the first year of the channel’s operation. Thus, the content was analyzed not only the publications posted by the Szczecin Dominicans, but also the comment sections, where viewers had the opportunity to join in the co-creation of the channel’s content. This made it possible to find answers to the following questions: How and for whom did the Szczecin Dominicans proselytize on YouTube in 2020? What kind of content did they share and was it exclusively for evangelism? Did they tailor the message to the addressees? And also, did the actions of the creators result in viewers joining in the co-creation of the channel’s content?

The Parish of St. Dominic in Szczecin

The Roman Catholic Parish of St. Dominic in Szczecin, whose pastors co-created the *Dominikanie Szczecin* channel, is one of the eight parishes in the Szczecin-Niebuszewo Deanery of the Szczecin-Kamień Archdiocese. The pastor of the parish, which had a faithful population of 15,880 in 2001 (Wejman, 2001), and the prior of the monastery, as of 2019 was Fr. Krzysztof Frąckiewicz, O.P. The Monastery of the Dominican Friars is located in the center of the city at Plac Ofiar Katyńia 1, and as we read

on the website, *Szczecin.dominikanie.pl*, “The history of the Order in Szczecin begins in the early 1970s.” However, the Dominicans celebrated their 25th anniversary in Szczecin in May 2014. The difference between history and residency is due to the fact that they identify as “the beginning of the history in Szczecin” as the very fact of searching for a suitable place to establish the order; while the official date of the Dominicans’ residency in Szczecin was May 15, 1989; that is, the day Fr. Jan Piątkowski, O.P., arrived to the city. In September 1989, the Provincial Council of the Order of Friars Preachers decided that “the future church will be under the name of St. Dominic,” and in December, Bishop Kazimierz Majdański³ consecrated the chapel of St. Dominic. On December 25, 1990, the decree of Kazimierz Majdański, Bishop of Szczecin and Kamień, to erect a parish under the name of St. Dominic came into effect, and the aforementioned Fr. Piątkowski, O.P., became the first parish priest. It should be added that two days later the General of the Order of Friars Preachers issued a decree to erect a religious house of St. Dominic in Szczecin.

Characterizing the parish of Szczecin’s Dominicans, it is worth mentioning that the “Veritas” Foundation and the Dominican School of Faith, the Living Rosary community, the “Brama” Dominican Academic Pastoral Care and the “Drabina” Dominican Youth Pastoral Care, the Dominican Prayer Group “Pneumatophora” Dominican Prayer Group and the Pastoral Care of Un sacramental Relationships operate here.

Genesis and promotion of the channel *Dominikanie Szczecin*

The start of the *Dominikanie Szczecin* YouTube channel was preceded by a poll concerning interest in online broadcasts of the services, which the creators conducted on the *Dominikanie Szczecin* Facebook page, asking a simple question on March 13, 2020: “Should we do a webcast of one of our Sunday Masses?” The response from the community around the

3 Archbishop Professor Kazimierz Majdański (1916–2007), born in Małgowo (Kalisz region), prisoner of Dachau (1940–1945); ordained priest in 1945 by Bishop Karol Radoński, auxiliary bishop in Włocławek from 1962, bishop from 1963, bishop of Szczecin and Kamień in 1979–1992, founded the world’s first Community of the Holy Family (Apostolic Life Association) in 1986. Vice President and Secretary of the Pontifical Committee for the Family since 1980 and member of the Presidium of the Pontifical Council for the Family since 1981. The biography published on the Curia’s website includes information that he brought many religious orders to Szczecin, including the Dominicans. An honorary citizen of Szczecin, in 1991 he was the first Pole to be awarded the Grand Order of the Grand German Cross Special Class by the President of Germany and the Order of the White Eagle for his services to Polish-German reconciliation.

Facebook account resulted in the fact that when on March 14, 2020, Archbishop Andrzej Dzięga, Metropolitan of Szczecin and Kamień stated in his pastoral word for the Third Sunday of Lent that “Everywhere can be prayed and everywhere should be prayed,” the Szczecin Dominicans were ready for action. On the same day, March 14, 2020, they published relevant information on Facebook, along with a link to the “Announcement of the Pastors of the Church of St. Dominic” at [Szczecin.dominikanie.pl](https://www.szczecin.dominikanie.pl), in which they officially announced online broadcasts of Sunday Masses.

However, the primary medium in which the *Dominikanie Szczecin* channel’s information and promotion was conducted was Facebook. This is where they shared links, published YouTube thumbnails and screenshots, and requested subscriptions (as a result, for example, on November 3, 2021, the channel gained 2.45 thousand subscribers, with views exceeding 38 thousand, at <https://www.youtube.com/@DominikanieSzczecinLive/about>).

The fact that the Szczecin Dominicans, who have been running online media for years, have given up on creating an owned media network by using links between the social media they did have may arouse some doubt. Although they posted a link to YouTube on the [Szczecin.dominikanie.pl](https://www.szczecin.dominikanie.pl) website, they did not link to the channel in the Information tab on their Facebook page, where, after all, they would inform the public about the new medium and promoted the content made available there; and they did not place a link to Facebook or the website in the Information tab on the YouTube channel. Although an interested member of the Facebook community wishing to watch a service broadcast who had followed the posts on a regular basis could seamlessly navigate to the channel, a casual YouTube user who came across the *Dominikanie Szczecin* channel and would search for other online media of the Information tab would not find anything. Linking the media together would make it easier for visitors to find other Dominican media, and for the fathers themselves, to promote the channel.

It is worth mentioning that the main channel of the Order of Friars Preachers, *Dominikanie.pl* (<https://www.youtube.com/c/Dominikanieplportal/channels>), and another local one, *Dominikanie Rzeszów*, participated in the promotion of the channel by recommending and subscribing, though without reciprocity, as the *Channels* tab on the *Dominikanie Szczecin* channel remained empty.

Dominikanie Szczecin content-wise

The discussed channel, available to everyone published 35 videos from March to November 2020. The first one, made available on March 16, 2020, two days after the channel was founded, was “Daily Vlog – Br. Tomasz

Kalisz, O.P. (16.03.2020)”; while the last one in the studied period was “Bible Day 2020” from 27 November 2020 (another upload was made in January 2021 from the live broadcast of the Day of Judaism celebrations at the Dominican church in Szczecin).

The short description “Dominican broadcasts and recordings from Szczecin” posted in the Information tab allowed for a YouTube user to presume that transmissions of religious services would be found on the channel, but “recordings from Szczecin” sounds a bit mysterious. Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that the Dominicans took care to define the categories of most uploads, creating not only playlists (“2020 Bible Week” and “Sermons”), but also adding precise titles (e.g., “Sermon – Fr. Krzysztof Frąckiewicz, O.P.”) and descriptions (e.g., “Daily Vlog – Br. Tomasz Kalisz, O.P.” has additional information on being a Gospel commentary). As a result, even before playing the video, a user would know that the channel primarily contains commentaries on the Gospels and sermons (these materials accounted for more than 70 percent of the content). On the other hand, those few videos whose neither titles nor descriptions made it possible to assign them to a specific category remained puzzling until played (e.g., a short video promoting the monastery under the title “Dominicans Szczecin,” or an entertaining video of a cat hesitating whether to enter a church, titled “Have a good Sunday!”).

The Dominicans of Szczecin, understanding the needs and preferences of the YouTube user, and thus the need to diversify the topics (and increase the attractiveness of the channel), in addition to commentaries on the Gospels and sermons posted in order to evangelize, also shared videos for the viewers’ consideration (“*Die Große Stille* – The Great Silence”), entertainment (the aforementioned “Have a good Sunday!”), or promoting student religious communities (“DA BRAMA / Students welcome!”). They would also react to the current situation resulting from the ongoing pandemic by publishing a “#stayinhome and...” appeal, as well as a “Blessing of food and wishes” on the occasion of Easter. It is worth noting that the Szczecin preachers were the authors of more than 80 percent of the materials made available on the channel (exceptions were, for example, two broadcasts made by external entities or the promotional video, “Dominicans of Szczecin”), and that they published them rather randomly and irregularly. In addition to the months in which they posted a record number of new publications (in March and April 2020 they released a total of 26 videos), there were months of silence (June, July, September and December). The suspension of posting for Advent and Christmas may have been puzzling; however, it should be emphasized that while the Szczecin Dominicans were withholding YouTube content, they did not stop evangelizing in other media (e.g., Soundcloud,

at <https://soundcloud.com/dominikanie-szczecin/sets/rekolekcje-adwentowe>). If we assume that increased online activity could “provoke believers to flee from the real problems of the Church community into cyberspace” (Giemza, 2005, p. 418), then Dominicans, precisely by publishing sparingly on the channel, did not contribute to the migration of the faithful from real parishes to their virtual substitutes. Even in the unprecedented situation resulting from the pandemic.

Form of message vs. target audience

Proper identification of the addressee of a broadcast guarantees fruitful communication, because it is the specifics of the audience that determines the message (Przybysz, 2018). Therefore, knowing that the channel’s viewers may be casual YouTube users, the Szczecin Dominicans made sure that their message was “simple, understandable, pictorial, full of examples” (Przybysz, 2018, p. 158). Moreover, understanding the ubiquity of visual culture, which, as emphasized by Fr. Chmielewski, C.Ss.R., “is not so much a threat, but rather a challenge to awaken faith not only through preaching in words (*fides ex auditu*), but also through the witness of life and visual communication of faith (*fides ex visu*)” (2014, pp. 227–228), used another approach. To strengthen the power of the message, they introduced clergymen as hosts who, as “a real flesh-and-blood person standing eye-to-eye with the viewer, weighs communicatively more than the written word or a static photograph” (Raś, 2017, pp. 100–101). “We throw the dirty stuff into the washing machine, that is, our sins, and confession is such an experience in which, as if mechanically, the Lord forgives us these sins,” Fr. Marek Urbanowski, O.P., figuratively explained the way to “restore confidence in God,” standing in a laundry room in front of the camera and throwing clothes into a washing machine.

The comments section, or viewers’ contribution to the channel

The content of the channel, in addition to the materials shared by the Dominicans, also consisted of comments published by viewers; responding to the Dominicans involved in the work of evangelization, who opened the comments session under most of the videos (comments were disabled under the Dark Lauds broadcasts). However, the mere fact of offering a comments section did not result in any particular activity from YouTube users. An analysis of the comments section showed that although

only about 17 percent of videos were left without comments, viewers rarely chose to do so. The aforementioned video of the cat hesitating whether or not to go inside the church (“Have a good Sunday!”) received the maximum number of 11 comments. Sermons and Gospel commentaries would have a maximum of 6 comments underneath. An analysis of the content of the comments section showed that although only about 17 percent of the videos were left without comment. Viewers rarely chose to do so. The most-played and at the same time best-rated promotional video, “Dominicans of Szczecin” (85 upvotes and no downvotes, with more than 3,000 views; as of 03/11/2021), received 4 comments. The comments section contained a small number of entries, and their authors were the faithful from, among others, Łódź, Puck, Wolin, Szczecin, but also, for example, Dublin, and (occasionally) the clergymen were responding to them (they answered, among other things, the question about the frequency of publication, comments about background music, or wishes).

The interactivity of the Internet, including YouTube, has introduced a condition for online media creators of adequate preparation (knowledge and skills), on top of time and readiness for “two-way and participatory” (Robak, 2014, p. 289) communication. However, it should be emphasized that this same interactivity also obliged the audience, especially those believing users of Catholic media, to be active, so that, as Agnieszka Gronkowska stressed, “in digital reality, we do not remain passive” (2018, p. 116). One would therefore expect feedback from the viewers of the Catholic channel, for example, in the form of comments under the shared content. Meanwhile, neither the channel’s creators nor its viewers showed any particular interest in communication beyond the message from sender to viewer. An analysis of the comments – thanks, well wishes and a few questions, including some unanswered – showed that there was no room for discussion. Viewers, although they became co-creators of the channel’s content through these few comments, remained “behind the line of the broadcaster’s message.” They simply accepted the content offered to them without reservation.

Summary

In 2020, when, due to the pandemic, the Internet became one of the platforms to attend Mass and, for some of the faithful, the only way to stay in touch with their priest, the Dominicans of Szczecin decided to set up a YouTube channel, *Dominikanie Szczecin*. The primary task of this new medium was evangelization, the realization of the priority function of Catholic media. They made it a reality mainly by publishing commentaries

on the Gospels and sermons; constructing the materials to keep the message simple and, through imagery, attractive to the YouTube viewer. However, understanding the peculiarities of YouTube, in order to increase the channel's appeal, the Szczecin preachers enriched the content with materials for reflection and entertainment, among other things. On the other hand, viewers of the channel, despite the opportunity to comment, interacting with Dominicans and other users, sporadically made the effort to write a comment. However, the channel's creators made no effort to activate them, so that the main broadcasters of the message remained the Szczecin Dominicans. Thus, the clear division between the evangelizers and evangelized has not been blurred.

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