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The Eucharist Online: Learning from Communications Theory

David Harrison¹

The suspension of public worship necessitated by the advent of the COVID-19 global pandemic in March 2020 resulted in a period of explosive innovation and experimentation, with digital technology being used to provide an opportunity for worship that was suddenly not possible in person. The phrases “online worship” and “virtual worship” became commonplace, as did conversations and debates about a host of practical, liturgical, and theological considerations that arise when worship happens through the medium of digital technology. As this explosive period of experimentation unfolded, so too did a great deal of “theologizing on the run” as liturgists, theologians, and practitioners began to classify, analyse, and try to make sense of this unprecedented period in the history of the church. Leaders were trying to grasp and to contextualize what was happening in the majority of their worshipping communities.

The challenges presented raised particular questions for communities accustomed to regular celebrations of the Eucharist. Liturgists, theologians, and practitioners now found themselves considering questions they had never before engaged: Is an online celebration of the Eucharist really a Eucharist? Is Christ present in such a celebration? If so, how, given that the eucharistic elements cannot be shared? Are those using technology participating, or are they merely observing? Can they receive the grace of the eucharistic celebration? What is that grace? Can online celebrations of the Eucharist be as formative and potentially transformative as in-person celebrations? Should the Eucharist even be celebrated if it cannot be celebrated in person?² And lest we think that these questions are becoming moot as the global pandemic subsides, it is already abundantly clear that online liturgy is here to stay, alongside in-person worship. A “hybrid” liturgical model is the future for many Christian communities because the pastoral, missional, and evangelical opportunities that have opened up through pandemic online worship have turned out to be too compelling to discard.

While theological and liturgical questions have predominated in much of the conversation about online worship, there is another body of thought which can be profitably brought to the conversation: communications theory. This is the area of research and theory which this paper explores. Communications theory is a well-developed and comprehensive field of learning which offers insight into the complex, multi-dimensional, and multi-directional relationship between and amongst the sender(s) and the receiver(s) of any form of communication, including ritual and online communications. What can this field of study

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² For example, the Anglican Church quickly produced a volume of reflections by theologians, liturgists, and practitioners (to which this author contributed): The General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada, comp., *Eucharistic Practice & Sacramental Theology in Pandemic Times: Reflections by Canadian Anglicans*, ed. Eileen Scully (Toronto: General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada, 2021), <https://www.anglican.ca/wp-content/uploads/EPST.pdf>. See also Bosco Peters, “Virtual Eucharist?” *Liturgy*, June 28, 2009, <https://liturgy.co.nz/virtual-eucharist> as just one example of the range and volume of writing that can be found through an internet search on “online Eucharist.”

tell us about the experience of worshippers who participate in the Eucharist through online technology?

Some theologians (James Farwell³ and Christopher Brittain,⁴ for example) have argued that online participation in the Eucharist fails to meet the test of physically gathered communal embodiment in the eucharistic celebration. During the early days of the COVID pandemic some juridical authorities agreed. For example, within the Anglican Church of Canada, the bishops in the province of Ontario declared a “eucharistic fast” for all congregations under their jurisdiction, arguing that “[e]fforts to replace the community’s physical-and-spiritual gathering with practices that try to offer a eucharistic community online, though well-intentioned, do not reflect our sacramental theology, which is deeply about the physical-and-spiritual together.”⁵ From the perspective of these theologians and bishops, an online medium does not suffice for eucharistic worship.

Communications theory, however, offers a much more robust and nuanced appraisal of what is happening when worshippers participate in a Eucharist that is mediated through digital technology. In this paper we will, in turn, examine reception theory as originally proposed in the late 1960s, active audience theory (a development of reception theory based on televised rituals) as articulated in the early 1970s and into the 1980s, the concept of the networked society (from the early 1990s), and ritual transfer theory (developed since 2000). Each of these approaches will underline the basic point that those who participate in online Eucharists can, in fact, be much more than passive spectators.

Reception Theory

Reception theory pays attention to those who receive communication (the audience), positing that the act of the communication from sender to receiver is not simple and linear, but rather a dynamic exchange in which the receiver’s receiving and response to what is transmitted is understood to be a vital component of the interaction. Reception theory points to the agency individuals have in interpreting the meaning of whatever media has been experienced (whether it is reading a book or watching a video) if they have paid attention during the experience and have made the effort to make meaning from that experience.

Communication theories about people’s experiences of viewing and engaging with television offer a relevant starting place for a consideration of online technology used to mediate eucharistic liturgies. In the 1970s, Stuart Hall developed the Encoding/Decoding model of understanding television communication.⁶ His work falls into the broad category of reception theory. Hall’s work challenged the assumption that watching television amounted to the simple one-way transmittal of information from sender to receiver, arguing instead that the production of a television event was more complex than other forms of

³ James Farwell, “The Assembly and Eucharist,” in *Eucharistic Practice & Sacramental Theology in Pandemic Times: Reflections by Canadian Anglicans*, ed. J. Eileen Scully (Toronto: General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada, 2021), 225.

⁴ Christopher Craig Brittain, “On Virtual Communion: A Tract for These COVID-19 Times (Part II),” *Anglican Journal*, May 25, 2020, <https://www.anglicanjournal.com/on-virtual-communion-a-tract-for-these-covid-19-times-ii/>.

⁵ General Synod Communications, “On This Eucharistic Fast,” *The Anglican Church of Canada*, March 24, 2020, <https://www.anglican.ca/news/on-this-eucharistic-fast/30026159/>.

⁶ Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” in *Media Studies: A Reader*, 3rd ed., ed. Sue Thornham, Caroline Basset, and Paul Marris (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 28–39.

communication. In his model, those who produce the television event encode it with certain meanings, which can be verbal or non-verbal. He posits four different stages involved in the process of creating and experiencing television: *production* (that is, the producing of the television event); *circulation* (how it is distributed); *use* (the broadcasting structures which transmit the event); and *reproduction* (how the audience receives the event).⁷

In offering the Eucharist in an online environment, liturgical planners and practitioners have had to deal with each of these four stages, whether they have been conscious of each stage or not. Production has ranged from churches engaged in a highly polished production process with multiple cameras offering different angles and the possibility for re-takes to churches using a single camera live-stream of a liturgical event to provide a digital view of what is happening. Circulation decisions have ranged from communities which make the Eucharist widely available through the internet and social media to communities where a Zoom password must be specifically requested in order to participate. Some churches have used online Eucharists as a way to approximate the community that previously gathered in person (by pre-recording or involving people live who are performing their accustomed liturgical roles as reader, intercessor or singer, for example). Others have used the liturgy to showcase the particular liturgical styles and practices of the community in as polished a way as possible. Some worshippers at home have received the event by gathering at a particular time and in a particular way, usually at the appointed time of the liturgy; others have receive it when they wished to access the event which had previously taken place and been transmitted. Already, then, in the production of an online Eucharist, and in the receiving of it, different choices have been made which impact how worshippers access and interact (participate). Each online Eucharist is already “encoded” by these choices. Elemental production and transmission decisions made by faith communities do matter.⁸ A decision in favour of a Eucharist offered on a Sunday morning at an appointed time sends the message that participation (and in the case of the Zoom platform, visibility) of worshippers at home is important. In a similar way, a decision to pre-record a celebration emphasizes a community’s determination that the production quality of the ritual act has primary importance. Allowing retakes and edits in itself communicates (whether intentionally or not) the values of that particular congregation, or of its leaders.

Ultimately, though, it is the worshippers at home who have the agency for meaning-making—regardless of the production, the transmission, the timing, and the context in which they participate in the Eucharist. In his analysis, Hall delineates three different “positions” of the receiver in decoding any media event.⁹ The first he calls the “dominant/hegemonic code,” whereby the receiver accepts the communication as it was encoded by the producer. The second is the “negotiated position,” meaning the receiver both accepts and rejects certain parts of the encoded message. And the finally is the “oppositional position,” whereby the receiver rejects the encoded message intended by the producer. Such a receiver can lay upon the event a different message altogether.¹⁰ This helps us understand that worshippers’

⁷ Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” 28.

⁸ For the perspectives of different liturgists and practitioners in the early days of the pandemic, see Heidi A. Campbell, ed., *The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online* (Digital Religion Publications: 2020), <https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/bitstream/handle/1969.1/187891/Distanced%20Church-PDF-landscape-FINAL%20version.pdf>.

⁹ Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” 36–37.

¹⁰ Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” 36–37.

experience of viewing an online Eucharist, regardless of however carefully or complexly those who produce it chose to encode it, cannot be pre-determined. Indeed, there are those who have received online worship in an oppositional manner, rejecting the very idea and possibility of online Eucharist. For others, there is a strong acceptance of the experience, and a focus on receiving it “as is,” often with gratitude. In the middle are those who would take the “negotiated position,” experiencing what the online Eucharist has to offer but not uncritically and not without discernment about what is missing, what is inadequate, and what might be faulty. In short, Hall’s theory helps us to understand that the producing and receiving of online liturgy is not neutral and is, by its very nature, a media event which is both encoded by the producers and decoded by the receivers. Hall’s work discards any notion that the ways in which individuals and communities experience the Eucharist online is any less complicated than when worship is experienced in person in a dedicated liturgical space.

Active Audience Theory

A development within reception theory is active audience theory. Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz explore participants’ reception in relation to televised ritual events,¹¹ work that has import for our understanding of participants’ experiences of online celebrations of the Eucharist. They note that the televising of ritual is not a new phenomenon. The coronation of Queen Elizabeth in 1953 was perhaps the first global television event, with reels of the live event being quickly transported by airplane (another use of technology) to be watched overseas within a close time frame of the actual event. Quite often it has been royal ceremonial occasions that have been the motivation for massive participation in a broadcasted ritual (the wedding of the Prince and Princess of Wales in 1981, the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales in 1997, the funeral of the Duke of Edinburgh in 2021, and most recently of the Queen in 2022). Dayan and Katz explore this phenomenon by first distinguishing between “routine” and “festive” television viewing.¹² They argue that events such as high-profile weddings and funerals move rituals into a broadcasting environment. (They were writing before the advent of the internet, but their observations remain pertinent.) Ritual participation in these events is allowed, they argued, by four factors: (1) the ability for people to access the event equally and for free; (2) the creation of a liminal space for the event—a particular time; (3) the enfolding of the ritual order on television; and (4) the positioning of and editing between the cameras so that the viewers can both observe and respond to what is going on, almost as if they were present at the ritual event mediated via television.

Similar dynamics are going on in the online transmittal of a ritual event such as the Eucharist. Dayan and Katz anticipate this possibility in their observation that “[t]he conversion of the home into a ceremonial place, focused on the center and aware of all the other homes in which the same thing is taking place at the same time, reminds one of festivals such as Christmas or Passover.”¹³ At the same time, they note the limitations of this ritual transference—limitations now made manifest in the world of online worship:

¹¹ Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz, *Media Events* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

¹² Dayan and Katz, *Media Events*, 120.

¹³ Dayan and Katz, *Media Events*, 131.

Television celebrants cannot react directly to the ritual performance or to the reactions of other members of the participating public. The very hugeness of the television audience has paradoxically transposed the celebration into an intimate register. Attendance takes place in a small group congregated around the television set, concentrating on the symbolic center, keenly aware that myriad of other groups are doing likewise, in similar manner and at the same time. Ceremonial space has been reconstituted, but in the home. When there is no way of “being there,” a ceremony is created to encapsulate the experience of “not being there.” Rather than an impoverished and deviant experience, it is an altogether different experience.¹⁴

Pointing to reception theory, Dayan and Katz note that “[t]he live broadcast transforms the ordinary roles of viewers, causing them to assume the roles proposed by the script.”¹⁵ At the same time, they are free to construct their own ritual actions and responses to the event. Physical gathering values highly the intimacy of assembling and, more often than not, the holiness of particular (and familiar) spaces. Their work, as well as Hall’s, leaves us with a clear understanding that those participating in an online Eucharist have the capacity to be an “active audience” and not simply passive spectators.

New Media and the Networked Society

The work of these previous theorists was predicated on experiencing television, where the transmission was still one way from producer to receiver. Digital technology has fundamentally changed the reception of media ritual events because of the introduction and expansion of the possibility of interactivity through the Internet, where the receiver is not only decoding what is transmitted and taking an active role in creating meaning, but also has the capacity to engage in the dynamic interplay by responding. The media technologies that enable interactivity have been called “new media,” to be distinguished from the “old” one-way communication media of film, television, and radio.¹⁶

Here the work of communications scholar Heidi A. Campbell and theologian Stephen Garner offers important insights pertinent to online worship. Ritual interactivity was starting to appear online as early as the mid-1990s, with the advent of chat groups and other means for sharing information and points of view regarding religion. Because of the option for interactivity on the World Wide Web, people could interact with religious rituals in a different and deeper way. In their book *Networked Theology*, Campbell and Garner observe:

[O]nline we see the reimagining of many traditional Christian rituals, such as worship in virtual-reality environments where one can light a digital candle as part of the practice. Early studies of religion online found that religious adopters of the internet readily defined it as a potential new sacred space to justify importing rituals online and creating new forms of religiosity in the space.¹⁷

¹⁴ Dayan and Katz, *Media Events*, 141.

¹⁵ Dayan and Katz, *Media Events*, 195

¹⁶ According to communications theorist Heidi Campbell and theologian Stephen Garner, “new media” is a term used to describe the whole range of digital technologies and forms of media, including computers, the internet, cell phones and smart phones, social networking software, and digital recording devices. See Heidi Campbell and Stephen Garner, *Networked Theology: Negotiating Faith in Digital Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016).

¹⁷ Campbell and Garner, *Networked Theology*, 71.

The authors describe early developments which would explode with the advent of the global pandemic. They consider The Life Church¹⁸ as an early innovator into online religious ritual, it being a worship experience offered *only* online.

The advent of a global pandemic pushed the boundaries of new media into new territory as churches adopted the relatively new technology of the internet and its attendant platforms for broadcasting and for social connection. Campbell and Garner introduce the idea of a “network society,” originally developed by Jan van Dijk.¹⁹ His definition, now thirty years old, posits that it is social and media networks which have become society’s prime mode of organization and structure. Campbell and Garner name this cultural phenomenon as a vital means of forming and sustaining Christian community, something that became necessary and urgent in light of the pandemic. Campbell and Garner outline something of the mixed reality of this network society:

The network both unites people and fragments them into specialized groups; it promotes both collaboration and individualization. The network is a social environment that builds a new space that both draws together and excludes. The network has also become the dominant metaphor for describing the expectation and patterns of behaviour for how people interrelate within our information-based society.²⁰

This insight claims that a new online interactive ritual space can be created—one without bricks, mortar, and walls—and that the church (and, more specifically, its liturgical life) is now occupying that space. What is created with an online Eucharist (and with any liturgy offered online) is a *new* network, a new community. In the case of congregations facing the reality of the pandemic, this community is not divorced or removed from the pre-pandemic community, although it is different. The community is different both in who constitutes it (including, quite possibly, those who are unknown and invisible) and *how* it is constituted. It is different in *how* individuals participate in the community and in its celebration of Eucharist. Ritual interaction of participants is possible in this new ritual space, with this digitally assembled worship community where individuals can participate to whatever degree they choose.

Ritual Transfer Theory

Christopher Helland considered the question of digital technology and the church with his introduction of the concepts of “online religion” and “religion online” as distinct categories that he saw emerging in the church’s early use of the internet.²¹ In his review of religious websites, he distinguished between sites where there was a high degree of interactivity (calling them examples of “online religion”) and those which were mainly

¹⁸ <https://www.thelifechurch.org>.

¹⁹ Campbell and Garner, *Networked Theology*, 8.

²⁰ Campbell and Garner, *Networked Theology*, 8.

²¹ Christopher Helland, “Religion Online/Online Religion and Virtual Communitas,” in *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*, vol. 8 of *Religion and Social Order*, ed. Jeffery K. Hadden & Douglas E. Cowan (London: JAI Press/Elsevier Science, 2000), 205–24.

transmitting information (calling them “religion online”).²² Even in the early days of church websites, there was an emerging difference in the orientation and function of those websites between those focused on the dissemination of information and those focused on the active engagement of others. This distinction takes on new import in light of the global pandemic. The church has now come to experience a necessary explosion in “online religion” and an exploration of an entirely new idea of what interactivity can be in an internet-mediated liturgical setting.

Helland explored this distinction in light of ritual transfer theory, first articulated at the University of Heidelberg. This theory holds that three forces are at work in determining whether the transference of a ritual from one context to another “works” or has failed: transformation (the process of shaping or reshaping something so that it can exist in a new environment), innovation (whether new aspects have been introduced), and exclusion (whether some aspects of the ritual have been discarded).²³ Helland argues that “[w]hen these three forces act upon the ritual, the people participating are then left with a different ritual than they have previously participated in and they have to decide if the ritual ‘works’ or if it has failed.”²⁴ The implication for online Eucharists is that the experience of participants, and their edification in participating in an online ritual, will be shaped by the extent to which these three forces are operative. For some, the transfer of the Eucharist online will prove impossible:

For many people, the exclusion of a real body is too much of a change and they will not participate, for others it may be the lack of nature, the taste of the wine, or the meal after the ceremony. In any case, the ritual transfer process will fail if these three forces somehow destabilize the ritual to the point that people will not recognize it as an authentic ritual activity. For other participants, the changes and transformations that occur to “bring” the ritual online will be seen as being within the margin of acceptability and they will view the ritual as authentic.²⁵

For Helland, this does not suggest a retreat back into the former ritual environment when it is no longer necessary or needed and in-person worship can resume. It is his view that online ritual is not merely a representative of “real” ritual, or a kind of substitute, but rather has become and will continue to be an integral reality in its own “rite.”

Online ritual is not representative of some form of extraordinary activity—rather it shows “ordinary” religious engagement in an extraordinary environment. Online ritual makes it clear that religion and religious practices are not going to disappear with the continued developments of science and technology. Ritual is woven into the cultural meaning-making system and, although many people in our contemporary world are not explicitly religious, ritual continues to play a significant role on a number of social, personal, and institutional levels. This challenges us to explore new forms of online religious engagement, patchwork forms of religious participation, and

²² Christopher Helland, “Online Religion as Lived Religion: Methodological Issues in the Study of Religious Participation on the Internet,” *Online-Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 1 (2005), doi:10.11588/HEIDOK.00005823.

²³ Christopher Helland, “Ritual,” in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, ed. Heidi A. Campbell (London: Routledge, 2013), 35.

²⁴ Helland, “Ritual,” 35.

²⁵ Helland, “Ritual,” 35.

patchwork ritual structures as very authentic and very real forms of religious activity in our wired world.²⁶

Helland's work underlines the basic point that the celebration of the Eucharist in an online environment is much more than the transmission of a physical event to a passive online audience. His argument is that it creates a new ritual—one which is no less authentic than the ritual it is replacing or transmitting.

Kerstin Radde-Antweiler addresses the question of the authenticity of online rituals: “[w]hy are online rituals not considered as real as offline rituals? Is there such a clear distinction between the real and the virtual? And is this an accurate or helpful analytical distinction?”²⁷ She argues that everything is “mediatized” and that, in a process she calls “the liquidation of tradition,” the object becomes separated from its source. The response of the receiver becomes paramount: online users are confronted with a huge amount of data that they classify and evaluate. This is complicated by the fact that such assessments must be made without face-to-face contact, meaning that users of the internet require different criteria for judging whether other users are trustworthy.²⁸ The central insight relevant to this discussion is that the Eucharist (or any liturgy) online is much more than the simple act of transmission and reception. Appropriately (from a theological and liturgical perspective) the disposition and response of the online participant is critical to the fruitfulness (or lack thereof) of the liturgical event.

Conclusion

Communications theory offers significant challenges to any assumption that those who attend worship online are not active participants in it. Instead, these theories reveal that the experience of the “audience” (the worshipper, in this case) at a mediated ritual event is not necessarily any less engaged, critical, and discerning than the experience of those participating in person at a ritual event. And these theories challenge communities to discern carefully, and to be open to re-discerning, their choices about the platforms and modalities used to transmit the Eucharist online. Communications theory also challenges assumptions concerning the necessity of physical proximity, the limits of sacramental reality, and that which constitutes “gathering.”

Participation in ritual electronically transmitted from elsewhere is not an entirely new phenomenon. Major public religious ceremonies have been broadcast since the early days of television. Viewers who, for instance, may have watched a royal coronation, wedding, or funeral have reported being significantly engaged in the ceremony. Their participation was real and embodied. Insofar as liturgy, and the Eucharist in particular, is about the activity of God in human time and space, communications theory would suggest that worshippers at home who are engaged in liturgy through digital technology can and do have authentic liturgical experiences.

²⁶ Helland, “Ritual,” 37.

²⁷ Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, “Authenticity,” in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, ed. Heidi A. Campbell (London: Routledge, 2013), 88.

²⁸ Radde-Antweiler, “Authenticity,” 98.