

## Past as Prologue: OCANews.org and the Orthodox Internet

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Unlike Caesar's Gaul, the current Orthodox Internet is in four parts: church websites (official or semi-official), the larger blogosphere, an audiosphere, and a much smaller videosphere. Yet this online realm also has much in common with Roman Gaul. For just as one modern Latin writer stated about Caesar's conquest, "all Gaul stinks," so the Orthodox internet reminds one of Lazarus in the tomb: "He stinketh" (John 11:39, KJV).

If the *New York Times* proclaims "All the News That's Fit to Print," official church websites generally print *only the news that fits*. For example, one looks in vain on official sites for serious rather than self-justifying reportage on the schism currently ripping Orthodoxy apart. With stories of hierarchs' anniversaries and formal greetings to each other, visitation schedules, endless photos of vestments, and answers to pastoral questions no one is asking, they are—to paraphrase Twain—visual chloroform. They trivialize rather than encourage the search for meaning.

The hundreds of privately sponsored Orthodox websites range from fascinating to plain awful. Some of the worst offer pastoral "guidance" full of questionable saints doing improbable things, such as stories about infants who fasted from their mothers'

breasts on Wednesdays and Fridays. Do these writers really believe that such drivel is persuasive or even meaningful in a world that questions the very existence of God, let alone his Church? The best pastoral websites are the ones that ask as many questions as they offer answers. Moreover, while every specific niche interest—icons, translations from Arabic, the relation of Judaism to early Christianity, sexual misconduct—seems to have its own website, too many of the best dealing with Orthodox topics have adopted a "non-religious" perspective so as to avoid church controversies, or are outright adversarial toward the Church.

Lest I seem too much the curmudgeon, let me quote a recent email I received from a longtime correspondent about the Orthodox blogosphere: "It is not going anywhere positive. I subscribe to several Yahoo Groups of various interests. All of them have seen a general decline in participation. A common denominator . . . has been a trend to move to Facebook. Facebook's reach is tremendous compared to something like Yahoo Groups. On Facebook, just about anything goes. People don't want to be restricted and they can say a lot of things on Facebook that would be blocked, say, on the [Yahoo Groups mailing list] Orthodox Forum, for example."

Between 2006 and 2011, Mark Stokoe edited the website *Orthodox Christians for Accountability* (OCANews.org), which published revelations about a range of misconduct in the Orthodox Church in America. The site, which was widely esteemed for high editorial standards and a commitment to transparency, led to the resignation or dismissal of a number of hierarchs, senior clergymen, and administrative staff. *The Wheel* invited Stokoe to reflect on the origins and impact of OCANews.org and to comment more broadly on the evolving role of the Internet in anglophone Orthodoxy.

Still, if blogs or audio podcasts cannot create authentic *homonoia* nor *koinonoia*, they can create bridges across the archipelago of church life, separated as we are in time and space. Unfortunately, as every Scandinavian knows, trolls live under bridges. Trolls are not friendly to humans, although they can be turned to stone when exposed to light. The trolls of the current Orthodox audio- and blogospheres are no exception. Unhappily, in a relentless quest for ideological purity, many bloggers and podcasters have already turned their own hearts to stone. They are best dismissed in the way Socrates, quoting a mythical Egyptian king, called out the dangers inherent in a new medium (in that case, written language): “You give your disciples not truth, but only the semblance of truth; they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality.”<sup>1</sup> In short, they bring the Church much opinion (*-doxa*) but little glory (*Ortho-*).

The videosphere has tended to offer little more than singing monks and hierarchs leading endless liturgies in every imaginable language. Notwithstanding the recent appearance of a few other kinds of broadcast, such as *Coffee with Sister Vassa*, this popular area of the Internet remains woefully underused by Orthodox Christians and their churches.

Sadly, with the exception a few academic sites, such as *Public Orthodoxy* from Fordham University’s Orthodox Christian Studies Center, and privately run sites, such as *Orthodoxy in Dialogue*, the most vibrant, thoughtful, and challenging part of the Orthodox Internet is the one that is invisible:

the sites, blogs, and Facebook groups hidden behind invitations and passwords, where people pursue their faith, their theological interests, their stories, and their reasoned reflections in private, for fear of Philodoxic Orthotrolls.

### The Experience of OCANews.org

I have some personal experience with Orthotrolls. During its five years of publication, the website for Orthodox Christians for Accountability—OCA-News.org—became one of the most successful entities on the Orthodox internet, both in terms of readership and influence. There can be little question that OCANews.org’s reporting initiated the investigations that led to the resignations of two Primates of the Orthodox Church in America (OCA) and the disgrace of a third; the resignation of two OCA diocesan bishops and the deposition of a third; the dismissal and later deposition of the longtime Chancellor of the OCA for misconduct and the resignation or removal of most of his Chancery staff; and the deposition of several priests and monks for sexual misconduct.

In addition to accountability, OCAnews.org’s calls for transparency led directly to more open and conciliar elections of at least two diocesan bishops in the OCA; to the revitalization of the OCA’s moribund Metropolitan Council and the elimination of its rubber-stamp “Administrative Committee”; to clean audits after decades of misinformation, financial irregularities and episcopal self-dealing; and to reform of official Church policies regarding finances, ethical standards, charitable distributions, and sexual misconduct. This account is not meant as a victory lap, but simply to point out that the Internet can be used to profound effect, even in the Orthodox Church.

<sup>1</sup> Plato, *The Phaedrus*, 275a–b, in *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, 3rd ed., vol. 1 (London: Oxford University Press, 1892), 484.

Indeed, the influence of OCA News.org was not limited to the Orthodox Church in America. The site was read in seventeen countries with state churches or large Orthodox populations. Its existence spread hope throughout the entire Orthodox world that misdeeds in the Church be successfully challenged and corrected. Moreover, the growing administrative and financial stability of the OCA over the last seven years is powerful, concrete evidence that transparency and accountability—especially on the episcopal level—make the Orthodox Church stronger, not weaker.

Does the experience of OCA News.org tell us anything about the Orthodox Internet and its future? To those who have eyes to see, yes.

### [The Trajectory of OCA News.org](#)

OCA News.org was predicated on the pioneering work of two previous Orthodox websites from the early days of the internet: Voithia.org (Greek for “helper”) and OrthodoxNews.com. Edited by layman Harry Coin, Voithia.org was dedicated to the sharing of information and commentary. Its advocacy helped topple the controversial leader of the Greek Archdiocese, Archbishop Spyridon, in 1999. After it ceased publication following the Archbishop’s resignation, its successor site OrthodoxNews.com—led by a former Voithia.org contributor, Stephen Angelides—became one of the first attempts at a truly independent English-language news portal for the Orthodox Church. It was Coin who suggested how OCA News.org should be structured, and who offered this profound editorial advice from scripture: “Be angry but do not sin” (Eph. 4:26).

From the very beginning, OCA News.org was a conciliar endeavor. In ad-

dition to the site’s editor, four other OCA members powered OCA News.org, among them the late OCA activist Nina Dimas of New York. They provided decades of expertise and contacts, broad editorial guidance, and invaluable support in editing and fact-checking. In fact, this article is the first time the team’s existence has ever been disclosed, as it was agreed early on that the editor was better positioned to handle the death threats, harassment, invective, and legal intimidation that were sure to follow. Some of this fallout was indeed worrisome enough to discuss options with the police, and some necessitated legal responses, all of which were successful. Other experiences were just plain comic, such as the lone protester who actually picketed my home parish for three consecutive Sundays in 2007. As OCA News.org became known, several private email support groups developed. I learned of two private email opposition groups as well, and there may have been more. Our supporters were integral in assisting OCA News.org as well as advocating and supporting reform initiatives in every OCA diocese. They explored options, found a path forward, and helped rescue the OCA.

The site’s purpose, as stated on its home page, was transparency: “To inform members of the Orthodox Church in America (OCA) of . . . financial misconduct at the highest levels of the central church administration of the OCA by providing news and supporting documentation.” The original goal, perhaps naive, was to shame the OCA administration by exposing its financial misconduct so it would stop. Ironically, it was Metropolitan Herman himself who turned a small flashlight into the dark world of Syosset into a massive searchlight when he dismissed the long-serving OCA Chancellor five months later in May 2006.

Over the ensuing five years, all sorts of misdeeds—financial, pastoral, and personal—came to light. As new crises emerged, subsequent reporting, guest reflections, and readers’ comments took the site into new and often unexpected areas. For example, in 2010, OCAnews.org was asked by both clerical and lay readers in the Antiochian Archdiocese to expand its reporting to examine a dispute between Metropolitan Philip and his bishops. As they described it, OCAnews.org was the best and only forum available for such a needed and impactful discussion: “There was no need to reinvent the wheel for everybody was already reading OCAnews.org.”<sup>2</sup> That reporting eventually led to one bishop’s transferring from the Antiochian Archdiocese to the OCA; to the revelation of subsequent attempts to discredit him, resulting in the removal of the dean of the OCA’s primatial cathedral; and to subsequent investigation into the role the OCA’s Metropolitan Jonah played in that and other events, leading in turn to his own resignation a year later. Once one begins overturning rocks . . .

OCAnews.org was credible because it held itself accountable. While the site never sought episcopal blessing, it quickly received the overt blessing and support of one hierarch, the late Archbishop Job of Chicago, who famously described his Archdiocese being composed of “free men in the Midwest.”<sup>3</sup> Accusations of being “the Mob” (and yet simultaneously “the work of a few disgruntled former employees”) and other slanders as “Satan’s handiwork,” the “work of Renovators,” and “that website with a gay agenda” are belied by the hundreds of Orthodox clerics, monastics and lay people involved in the conciliar operation and support of OCAnews.org. Although the site clearly reflected the tradition of advocacy journalism, when something was

misstated, it was publicly corrected. Authors were always identified, even if the sourcing that informed them (triple sourcing, whenever possible) often had to remain confidential. Hundreds of reflections were published by authors on all “sides” of controversies, both those who questioned current church positions and those who supported them. The only things that were forbidden, as the editor was far too often forced to repeat, were personal invective and profanity in the comments section.

OCAnews.org ended in November 2011 as the editor was unable to continue. There was simply no way to keep writing, editing, and responding to comments, given a travel schedule that would lead in the ensuing five years to thirty-seven countries and all fifty states. The editor had already made the site’s closure—as well as his own intention to resign from the Metropolitan Council, to which he had been elected in in 2008, for the same reason—clear to Archbishop Job’s successor the previous July. That hierarch’s decision in August to dismiss the editor from the Metropolitan and Diocesan Councils played no role in the decision to end publication. It was simply a cheap and unnecessary shot by a bishop who refused to believe church leaders should be held accountable in any way, decrying it all as “counterproductive” and promoting “gossip.”<sup>4</sup>

## The Way Forward

Given the infection of ideologies among Baby Boomers, many of whom are refugees from lost culture wars, the spiritual apathy of Gen Xers to anything that smacks of “organized religion,” and the bloody-mindedness of millennials regarding the value of experiences other than their own, the potential of the Internet to inform, educate, or inspire anyone about Ortho-

<sup>2</sup> Private email message to the author, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> See Steven Kostoff, “Archbishop Job: A Witness to the Truth,” *Orthodox Christian Meditations* (blog), January 3, 2010, <http://orthodoxmeditations.blogspot.com/2009/12/archbishop-job-witness-to-truth.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Bishop Matthias of Chicago to Mark Stokoe, August 9, 2011, quoted in “Stokoe Dismissed From Metropolitan Council—Again,” *Orthodox Christians for Accountability*, August 10, 2011, <http://www.ocanews.org/news/StokoeDismissed8.10.11.html>.

doxy seems dim at this time. The current schism may only exacerbate the current malign trends. Nevertheless, the experience of OCAnews.org suggests a way forward for the Orthodox Internet.

OCAnews.org is evidence that vast numbers of Orthodox readers will use the Internet on an almost daily basis to learn more about their Church. It requires virtually no money: OCAnews.org never took advertising nor accepted any donations. It does not require scandal. What it requires is credibility, which itself depends on both the freedom to inquire and transparency of purpose. In short, the Orthodox Internet is lacking serious journalism. Only the creation of a real fourth estate can save the other three—the nobles (bishops), clergy (priests), and commoners (laity)—on the Internet. The way forward for Orthodoxy on the Internet, as in life, requires conciliarity, which is almost a lost relic (despite lip service to *sobornost*, only the OCA and the now-orphaned Exarchate for Orthodox Parishes of the Russian Tradition in Western Europe even attempt to follow the conciliar example of the 1917 Moscow Council). In practical terms, while all Orthodox websites that seek to offer serious journalism—rather than religious entertainment—should demonstrate clergy and laity working together, their administration must be lay. Lay control does not automatically guarantee credibility, but clerics have little incentive, courage, or even ability to speak truth to power, dependent as they are on those powers for their live-

lihood. And everyone already knows that this is true, clergy most of all.

As the symbiotic relation of OCAnews.org and the OCA witnesses, the Church is made stronger and more stable by the accountability and transparency that a conciliar fourth estate promotes. A renewed commitment to journalism on the Orthodox Internet would revitalize our common pilgrimage. As the digital world evolves, change is not an option but a requirement if we are to remain the Orthodox Church, and not devolve into just another sad, fading Christian sect.

And that is a real danger. Our current failure to use the Internet effectively is not just a lost opportunity, but a portent of worse to come. As secularism fails almost as rapidly as the Church stumbles, alternative ideologies such as transhumanism are effectively using the Internet to reach massive audiences hungry for spirituality, offering them new visions of life, meaning—and immortality. When confronted with massive intellectual and social changes occasioned by the rapid rise of science in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Christianity, East and West, did not embrace these challenges. It turned defensive, retreating to dogmatism, focusing on rules over experience, and using overt political power to maintain the Church's increasingly tenuous hold on society. Confronted with the challenges of the Internet in the twenty-first century, will we make the same mistakes? ✱

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