

## Article

# Understanding the Paradox of (Im)Perfection: An Actor-Network Approach to Digitally Mediated Preaching

Frida Mannerfelt <sup>1</sup>  and Tone Stangeland Kaufman <sup>2,\*</sup><sup>1</sup> Faculty of Theology, University College Stockholm, SE-168 39 Bromma, Sweden; frida.mannerfelt@ehs.se<sup>2</sup> Department of Theology, MF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society, N-0301 Oslo, Norway

\* Correspondence: tkaufman@mf.no

**Abstract:** This paper adds to the growing body of literature on digitally mediated preaching by using actor–network theory (ANT) in conjunction with Amanda Lagerkvist’s work on digital media as theoretical lenses to describe and discuss what we term “the paradox of (im)perfection”. This paradox refers to the tension between an ideal of perfection and an ideal of imperfection (or vulnerability) as experienced by church practitioners who were “thrown” online abruptly and unexpectedly due to the pandemic. In our analysis we show how human and non-human actors interact (and act on each other) in ways that assemble their networks towards a mode of visibility and perfection, or towards a mode of authenticity, intimacy, and imperfection. In the former mode, preachers and church practitioners find themselves competing in “a mimetic visibility contest” that is characterized by an ontology of numbers (likes, follower counts, retweets, etc.) and a subsequent ethos of quantification. In the latter mode, an ethos of care affords the opportunity for spiritual intimacy, even among “anonymous” online individuals. Drawing on Deanna A. Thompson’s and Amanda Lagerkvist’s work, we argue that the latter mode enacts “a cruciform media ethics” in which the embodied worshiping community interacting online can be understood as “the virtual body of the suffering Christ”. Here, digital media is enacting as “caring media” rather than “metric media”. While the paper introduces message-oriented, media-oriented, and ontology-oriented approaches as helpful for the study of digitally mediated preaching, it ultimately argues for the superior virtues of ANT as a non-dichotomous approach—overcoming both the message/media and the virtual/real divides which are often inherent to other approaches.

**Keywords:** online preaching; homiletics; digital mediation; Actor-Network Theoryactor–network theory



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## 1. Introduction

As guest editor Sunggu Yang puts it in the introduction, this Special Issue focuses on “the practice of preaching as it is developed and performed in today’s revolutionary context of digital technology and social media”. How, then, do we, as homileticsians, engage with the *study* of digitally mediated preaching? Before the COVID-19 pandemic, homiletical research that dealt with the practice of preaching in digital culture was scarce (Yang 2020, p. 75). The pandemic changed all of that. As churches underwent a variety of digital transitions in response to a patchwork of pandemic-era government regulations and restrictions, homiletical interest naturally followed. The present paper hopes to add to this growing body of literature by offering a socio-material approach to describe and discuss what we call “the paradox of (im)perfection”. This phenomenon first emerged for us in an empirical study of what “being church” meant in digital spaces, specifically in the diocese of Stockholm, Sweden, and in the period when preachers and other church practitioners were thrown online overnight en masse by the pandemic.

The article proceeds as follows. We begin by briefly outlining three approaches to the study of digitally mediated preaching, followed by methodological reflections (Section 1). Next, we introduce our theoretical lenses: actor–network theory (ANT) and, to a somewhat

lesser extent, media theorist Amanda Lagerkvist's work on the nature of digital media (Section 2). Then, we analyze "the paradox of (im)perfection" by means of two strategically sampled cases from our empirical study, which constitutes the bulk of the article (Section 3). Finally, we draw both on Lagerkvist and Lutheran theologian Deanna A. Thompson, particularly her conceptualization of the church as "the virtual body of the suffering Christ", to argue for a *non-dichotomous approach* to the homiletical discussion of digitally mediated preaching (Section 4).

### 1.1. Three Trajectories for Digitally Mediated Preaching

According to Frida Mannerfelt, three of the most common paradigms for engaging in an analysis of digitally mediated preaching each tend to rely and reinforce certain unhelpful binaries. (Mannerfelt forthcoming). While these paradigms are contiguous with those that have been applied to onsite preaching, and have contributed to essential insights about the practice of preaching as a whole, the unprecedented pandemic-era mass transition to digital contexts has only served to further reveal inherent problems in each approach. However, before we analyze these trajectories further, it behooves us to briefly outline them.

First is *the message-oriented trajectory*. Homiletician Lisa S. Kraske Cressman paradigmatically embodies this approach, downplaying the role of media, formats, and methods when she writes: "The reasons we preach and the components that constitute a sermon are unaffected by the medium. The word of God is transmitted just as efficiently whether told as a story in ancient times, read silently in a Bible a hundred years ago, or listened to in a podcast today" (Kraske Cressman 2021, pp. 46–47). For Cressman, the core components and purposes of a sermon—that is, to liberate the listener to praise, gratitude, celebration, and action—are not dependent on the medium. The message-oriented approach, then, focuses on human agency, with the result being that the medium is made invisible, or relegated to a bit part in the preaching event.

Second, at the other end of the scale, we find *the media-oriented trajectory*, in which communication or media theories are the most critical aspect of the analysis, sometimes overshadowing all other factors. This approach focuses on how the various affordances of different types of digital media, and different platforms, affect preaching, often including podcasts (Plüss 2022), Whatsapp (Masoga 2020), Instagram (Lienau 2020; Menzel 2022), or Twitter (Cheong 2014; Codone 2014; Burge and Williams 2019; Mannerfelt 2022) in its purview. In contrast to the message-oriented trajectory, then, this paradigm is at risk of paying too much attention to media and medium, ending up in what Pink et al. (2016, pp. 41–58) call "a media-centric approach".

Third is *the ontological trajectory*. As homiletician Casey Thornburgh Sigmon (2017) has emphasized, the close connection between the word and the table, as elaborated in 20th Century theological thinking, has ensnared digitally mediated preaching, as well as transcribing well-trodden discussions about theological ontology and real presence into the new key of online communion. Often, this results in digitally mediated preaching being dismissed as *unreal* and *disembodied*. One example is Luke A. Powery's discussion about the advantages and challenges of online preaching, in which he fears the "loss of incarnational preaching" as a real risk. Referencing the doctrine of the incarnation, he contrasts "real" and "virtual", stating that: "Real human bodies, as opposed to virtual realities and bodies, are essential for the preaching ministry [...] Jesus was the Word incarnate, a person, an enfleshed sermon, not a text". (Powery 2016, p. 215).

As theologian Katherine G. Schmidt (2020, pp. 15–18) has noted in her overview of theological discourse on virtual ecclesiology and liturgical practices, most theological accounts of the internet are undergirded by such opposites and binaries. According to Schmidt's analysis, this tendency toward dichotomic thinking stems from the idea that digitally mediated interactions draw people away from what is real, and somehow does not involve bodies or other kinds of materiality. For these reasons, many theologians argue that digitally mediated social action, communal gatherings, or preaching events can never measure up to their onsite counterparts. In fact, they might even lure people away from

what is truly real: God. Accordingly, the coin of the realm in this theological discourse, is the oppositional, contrasting terms of virtual and real—with the “real” being separate and superior from the virtual.

There are a few notable exceptions to this in the homiletical discourse. One is theologian Ilona Nord, who sees the virtual as a continuation of the real—a consequence of the fact that being itself is mediated. Pointing to particular passages in Scripture that describe revelations of God and the nature of reality as mediated, Nord argues that there is no such thing as “an unmediated experience with reality” (Nord 2011, pp. 31–37). While this position is common among scholars who specialize in digital media and religion (see, for example, Campbell and Tsuria 2022), it is not yet particularly common in the field of homiletics, the discipline at issue in the present article. As such, the ontological approach is still more common among homileticians, and may thus dismiss digitally mediated preaching based on a presumed, arguably unjustified, dichotomy between real/virtual.

However, what if there were another approach available to us? We aim to supplement the three trajectories outlined above, each valuable in their own right, with a fourth trajectory: a *socio-material trajectory*, in which the message/media and virtual/real binaries are made more nuanced and even collapsed. Here, the paradox of (im)perfection will come to the fore as an observed phenomenon that further complicates and illuminates the range of merits and harms available to digitally mediated preaching in its context of related church practices.

### 1.2. Methodological Reflections

However, before moving on to a fuller analysis of this paradox and the socio-material trajectory it elucidates, a few methodological considerations are needed. The project *Church in Digital Space* (CiDS), from which the following empirical case studies are drawn, was initiated by the Church of Sweden (CofS), implemented by the bishop of Stockholm diocese, and spearheaded by his theological advisor, Sara Garpe, and Jonas Idestrom, a professor of practical theology. The project took place from January 2021 to September 2022, and intentionally drew on the experiences of church leadership and laity during the widespread digital transition churches underwent as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is probably not coincidental that such a project was conducted in Stockholm and CofS, as Sweden is one of the most digitalized societies in the world (Digital Economy and Society Index 2022), and the CofS is an unusually affluent church. In most local CofS parishes, for instance, there is typically a director of communication on staff, and very often paid A/V technicians.

The aim of the CiDS study was to find sustainable and theologically informed ways to keep church doors open online, even when the lockdown of onsite church locations ended. The project was designed as an “action research project”<sup>1</sup> organized into four sub-projects, involving a total of seven congregations in the Diocese of Stockholm, the diocese employees, the CofS national research unit, and five researchers. As in most action research projects, the empirical material was generated and analyzed through an intense collaboration between researchers and practitioners (Garpe et al. 2022, pp. 6–18).

The analysis of the paradox of (im)perfection in this paper takes as its point of departure two cases from one of the sub-projects found in this greater CiDS study, conducted by Jonas Idestrom and Tone Stangeland Kaufman together with the practitioners in two parishes (Idestrom and Kaufman 2022a, 2022b). However, as the phenomenon in question also occurred in the sub-project conducted by Frida Mannerfelt and Rikard Roitto in conjunction with practitioners in two other parishes (Mannerfelt and Roitto 2022a, 2022b), we briefly compare findings from it in our analysis of the former.<sup>2</sup>

Our analysis is built from individual interviews with church employees and volunteers, recordings of worship and devotions, and group interviews. Notably, the group interviews were conducted as four successive workshops with each group<sup>3</sup>, in which church employees (hereafter called *practitioners*)<sup>4</sup> contributed to planning the research process, including the research question, and discussed various aspects of “being church” in digital space by looking at websites, Facebook pages, recordings of digitally mediated preaching, and

more. The researchers recorded and transcribed parts of the workshops, and also took notes. They also presented relevant theories for the practitioners to consider in relation to their own digitally mediated practices, and encouraged the practitioners to reflect on them.<sup>5</sup> This means that some, though not all, of the theoretical perspectives used in the analysis here were part of the discussions conducted in the sub-project. The practitioners in question are employees of the CofS: pastors, musicians, religious educators, technicians, communications directors, and deacons.

Finally, the practice of preaching is analyzed as part of the larger context of liturgical and congregational life. As Kaufman et al. notes in a study of intergenerational preaching, which concluded by including the entire worship service in its purview, we, too, found it impossible to separate the practice of preaching from its context, particularly when applying a socio-material lens (Kaufman 2021, pp. 11–13). Similarly, Theo Pleizier finds that listeners often experience preaching and worship as an inseparable whole (Pleizier 2010, p. 165), a finding that corresponds with Frida Mannerfelt's own recent study on listeners listening to digitally mediated preaching (Mannerfelt 2023). To better understand the paradox of (im)perfection, our analysis attends to more than just the bare words of the sermon, but intentionally expands its scope to religious practices that border the practice of preaching, such as digitally mediated intercession and other digital features and practices that inform the larger themes of visibility, performance, and intimacy.

## 2. Theoretical Lenses

A number of theoretical lenses have inspired our analysis, namely actor–network theory and Lagerkvist's work on the nature of digital media, to which we now turn.

### 2.1. Actor–Network Theory

Actor–network theory (ANT), as outlined for example by Bruno Latour and John Law,<sup>6</sup> is a socio-material approach from which we draw our own understanding of digitally mediated preaching. Despite having its origin in studies of science and technology (STS), ANT has recently been employed in several fields adjacent to homiletics to analyze various religious practices, including the fields of theology and pastoral learning (Reite 2013, 2015; Holmqvist 2014; Johnsen 2015; Holtedahl 2017; Idestrom 2016; Kaufman and Idestrom 2018; Gregersen 2021; Kaufman and Mosdøl 2018; Johnsen and Afdal 2020; Ledstam and Afdal 2020).

The present article takes a similar approach, using ANT as a heuristic device to create an analytical distance from a familiar field of study (in our case, homiletics). Applying ANT in this way provides several salutatory benefits to the field of homiletics. Firstly, it introduces ANT to this academic field, as literature searches show that ANT is an underutilized theoretical resource in homiletics.<sup>7</sup> While Kaufman and Mosdøl (2018) employ ANT as one analytical tool in their study of intergenerational preaching, the framework is not used extensively for in-depth analysis, as is being explored in this article. Secondly, ANT has not been applied to digitally mediated preaching before, as far as we know—a lacuna in the literature that this article seeks to fill.

Although there are considerable incoherences and tensions between scholars affiliated with ANT—even between Latour and Law—it is possible to identify some shared key characteristics relevant to our analysis. Contra structuralism, ANT thinkers tend to dismiss explanations for human behavior that take the underlying structures of society as their starting point. Instead, according to ANT, the world consists of bits and pieces that are ordered and connected in various ways (Law 2007), but which are often invisible and taken for granted. The processes of acquiring knowledge and the generation of “facts” are, as ANT puts it, “black-boxed”—that is, hidden (Latour 1987). The establishment of Christian doctrines is no exception. Once doctrines are approved as ecclesial and orthodox (widely understood), the controversies that led to their establishment, including the sometimes ugly interactions between ecclesial actors in the process of coming to an agreement, tend to be quickly forgotten (Kaufman and Idestrom 2018, p. 101). Take, for example, the doctrine of the Trinity, and the many attendant councils, treatises, and bitterly contested arguments

behind its formalization in the historical record—much of which is not widely known by your average contemporary Christian, or taught in a given local parish. ANT has an analytical interest in opening the black box, and exploring the unfolding, often previously “invisible” network that results.

A second key characteristic of ANT is the idea that agency is not restricted to humans.<sup>8</sup> On the contrary—pathogens and natural events (such as viruses or pandemics), material objects (books, Bibles, guitars, pianos, sanctuaries, pulpits, hymnals, iPads, smartphones, social media, cameras, microphones, projectors, cords, and websites), and other less visible non-human actors (i.e., algorithms and electricity), all play a prominent role as actors in enacting dynamic, ever-changing networks of relations. Human actors (such as practitioners and participants in digitally mediated worship services) are equally significant parts of such networks, relating to and interacting with other humans and non-human actors alike. ANT thus maintains a symmetry between human and non-human actors, with both bringing resources and constraints to situations in which they define and act upon each other (Fenwick et al. 2011).

An actor, also called a “mediator” in ANT terminology, is “anything that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference” (Latour 2005, p. 71). Actors “transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry” (Latour 2005, p. 39). Moreover, they themselves are not left unchanged by the process. Two examples not too far afield from homiletics are the enactment of liturgical reforms, and the embodiment of doctrines in local church contexts. Ingrid C. Reite Christensen shows how liturgical reforms are not simply “implemented”, but rather “enacted into being” by professional learning networks of pastors (Reite 2015, p. 405). The reform itself is not left unchanged by these networks, either, as they recreate, replace, or ignore it—and thus can be said to translate it (Reite 2015, p. 405). The importance of translators and mediators surfaces again in the work of Jonas Idestrom, who describes how doctrines are embodied in the practices of local church life, such as the Eucharist, and how these embodiments serve as mediators of the Christian tradition (Idestrom 2016). These doctrinal embodiments carry the Christian tradition into new networks and situations, with neither the doctrines themselves, nor the Christian tradition, left unchanged by the process. The opposite of *actors/mediators* would be so-called *intermediaries*—empty vessels, which only transport meaning or message, leaving no impact on the message and remaining themselves unchanged by it.

ANT understands the world to be profoundly relational. Everything in the social and natural worlds is enacted in webs or networks of relations. ANT “tells stories about ‘how’ relations assemble or don’t” (Law 2007, p. 2). According to Law, ANT can be “understood as a toolkit for telling interesting stories and interfering in those stories”, offering “a sensibility to the messy practices of materiality and relationality of the world”. (Law 2007, p. 2). As an analytical toolkit, one which we seek to employ here, ANT is able to trace networks of interactions and connections between various actors or mediators, studying the way in which they relate to one another and what they do to each other in looser or more stable networks (Latour 2005, p. 8). Law terms this “modes of ordering” (Law 1994), and the highly relational, network-enmeshed lens of ANT means even material objects, such as Bibles, digital platforms, or technology, are not to be regarded as static or reified. Rather, they are dynamic, entangled in our practices, and ordered in various and ever-variable ways.

A fifth key feature of ANT concerns ontology. In ANT the “real” is neither constructed in our minds (constructivism) nor a fixed a priori reality (realism). Instead, the real is enacted in dynamic, ever-changing networks of relations. Notably, this position does not reduce reality to a mere plurality of subjective viewpoints. Rather, it claims that things and situations are real *in their consequences* and *in their relations*, as they are *enacted into being*. Not surprisingly, this rather controversial ontology has prompted criticism. Graham Harman has written at length on Latour, and points to the problem of reducing material objects to their potential as actors, thereby limiting an object’s existence to its possibility for engaging in interactions and translations (Harman 2009). Other critics object to the weighting given

to ANT's symmetry between human and non-human actors, and instead prefer to speak of the latter as "artifacts" rather than actors, agents, or actants (Schatzki 2019). Another line of critique comes from the sociology of knowledge tradition, of which David Bloor's famous paper "Anti-Latour", is an example (Bloor 1999). Critics have also foregrounded the lack of substantial political critique yet apparent in ANT studies, referring to the promise of such developments as "ANT and After" (Alcadipani and Hassard 2010).<sup>9</sup> Despite these critiques, we still find ANT to be a helpful analytical tool kit, especially when it is supplemented by the modulating perspectives of media theory and theology.

## 2.2. Digital Media as Metric Media and Caring Media

ANT allows us to scrutinize digital media as a central actor in networks, but it is less helpful in analyzing the ethical and theological consequences of such networks and the various actors who take part in them. Supplementing ANT with ethical, moral, and theologically-informed approaches, such as those found in Amanda Lagerkvist's and Deanna Thompson's works, helps to better foreground crucial theological issues—such as vulnerability—and enables us to critically discuss what Lagerkvist terms "metric media".

Building on philosopher Karl Jasper's concept of *the limit situation* as a framing device to understand media, Lagerkvist draws attention to the precise existential and ethical perspectives of media. She foregrounds the importance of materiality: media are considered materiality, and to some extent, all materiality is conceived of as media. Media are embedded into existence as the very building blocks of existence itself. Being is enacted in and through the entanglement of media. For Lagerkvist, new materialism and its thinkers often miss an important implication that flows from this ontology. If being is enacted in relation to materiality and others, the result is radical *interdependence*, and since both the humans and the media involved are themselves limited, bounded, and finite, they are also *vulnerable*.

Lagerkvist, therefore, approaches digital media as enabling possibilities for relationality and connection in vulnerable situations, with the upshot that digital media can become a literal lifeline for the suffering (Lagerkvist 2022, pp. 38–47). She calls this dimension of digital media *caring media*.

Lagerkvist also identifies *metric media* as a feature of digital mediation, which exists in tension with the caring dimension described above. Metric media often fosters a culture based around an *ontology of numbers* in which numbers confirm existence, validate importance, and communicate care. Lagerkvist describes the resulting *ethos of quantification* as an ideology in which numbers reveal hidden truths about value, being, selfhood, and body. However, while digital media might amplify the ontology of numbers and ethos of quantification, these are not new phenomena but ongoing features of modernity (Lagerkvist 2022, pp. 1–12, 120–46). In Lagerkvist's argument, digital media's metric dimension is closely connected to the idea that digitality itself promotes limitlessness, creativity, and the belief that anything is possible—with vulnerability, suffering, and limitation often rendered invisible. (Lagerkvist 2022, pp. 1–12, 107–9).

## 3. The Paradox of (Im)Perfection

This precise paradox—whereby one dimension of digital media supports the building of connection and intimacy via vulnerability and imperfection, while another dimension races toward perfection and quantified visibility—lies at the heart of what we observed practitioners and preachers grappling with as their church communities underwent sometimes wrenching digital transitions in our empirical study. To describe and analyze the paradox of (im)perfection, we must trace the networks of digitally mediated preaching, focusing on the ways in which various mediators relate to one another and what they do to each other, and studying the modes of ordering that structure this network. What are the significant actors in this network and how are they connected? What modes are enacted? What are the salient features of these modes?

### 3.1. Towards a Mode of Visibility and Perfection

It ended up as a contest. There was so much creativity. Everyone was supposed to be visible! It was like competing in the Olympics without having prepared for it! (Group interview)

#### 3.1.1. Thrown into a Visibility Contest

The notion of a “visibility contest” first surfaced in a group interview, an attempt by practitioners to describe the difference between being church in “the old way”, as they expressed it, and being church online. To some, the “new way” of being church was like “competing in the Olympics without having prepared for it”, and furthermore was often tinged by failure: “It ended up not reaching the level of the Olympics!” The term “contest” or “competition” was repeated several times in the same group interview, as was the notion of “being visible” as a constitutive part of that competition. Church staff were expected to participate in this visibility contest, they felt, with one communication director in particular emphasizing the outsized significance of being visible in online church.

A group of practitioners in the sub-project conducted by Mannerfelt and Roitto described their feelings of frustration and shame when their digitally mediated worship services did not garner as much interaction as the practitioners had hoped for (Mannerfelt and Roitto 2022b, pp. 70–71).<sup>10</sup> To them, the number of views, comments, and likes—the amount of visibility, or quantified visibility, that a sermon or a posting from the church or preacher accrued—indicated whether their efforts to proclaim the gospel were heard and appreciated. They counted and compared themselves with other preachers in the congregation and with preachers in other churches. Visibility, as quantified by the metric of social media interactions, also functioned as evidence to congregational leadership of whether it was worth continuing with digitally mediated worship at all.

The first group of practitioners also connected visibility to value within the ecclesiastical workplace. One of them mentioned the fear of future layoffs: “It is important to be visible in order to survive [in the organization]. If you are not visible, you might disappear!” One of the directors of communication shared that she felt this “visibility contest” even when opening Facebook on vacation and scrolling through what other parishes and congregations had posted online.

#### 3.1.2. Digital Media and Algorithms as an Actor

The sudden transition to digital spaces, and the subsequent visibility contest church practitioners felt they were newly enmeshed in, was prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Expressed from the perspective of ANT, a strong non-human actor, a *virus*, traveled all over the world, leading to a *pandemic* with immense consequences as it engaged in *translations* with innumerable other actors, with the consequence that many churches had to close their onsite church doors for often indefinite periods of time. Most churches (sometimes reluctantly) had little choice but to go online on short notice. Lockdowns thus paved the way for another key non-human actor, *digital media*, to take the stage. It is important to note that digital media is by its nature characterized by multiplicity, with possible variations in hardware and software, and the countless different ways humans can interact with both, contributing to myriad possibilities. Hence, from a strictly-held ANT perspective, digital media would of course not be considered one *singular* actor. Digital media are, after all, an entanglement of different kinds of hardware and software, which all contribute to the assemblage experienced as “digital media”. However, while we seek to open this black box and demonstrate its complexity, we also close it at times for the sake of clarity and generalization, relating to digital media as one key actor significantly acting on other actors in the network of digitally mediated preaching and worship.

The complexity of digital media as a mediator is important, not least in relation to *algorithms*. Although invisible to most human end users in the digital media assemblage, algorithms are a crucial non-human actor. Consider the following quote from an interview with a director of communications:

**Interviewer (I):** Do you think in algorithms?

**Informant:** Yes, all the time.

**I:** Could you please give us an example of this?

**Informant:** I need to hit it right. When it comes to thinking about algorithms, it is like, as soon as you have understood it, then they have changed it. And it is . . . you cannot plan, only try and test. Put out things and see what happens, put out things and see what happens . . . it was right after the summer this year. After the summer. Why don't people look at our stuff. People were tired [of the digital church experience]. Because we had so many hits during spring, the algorithms liked us. They caught an eye on us. In order to become popular again, we must be visible. We went out and told everyone to publish more of what they are doing [on social media]. If you don't click on stuff from CofS, you won't get that kind of stuff in your social media flow. It is a bit revealing when the chair of the parish board asks why we have not published stuff. Yes, but we have. But you don't click enough [on CofS content]. They [the algorithms] have interpreted [it] as if you are not interested [in CofS content].

Note how algorithms are given agency and are personified in terms of “liking us”, “having their eyes opened to us”, and “have interpreted it”. At the same time it is obvious they do not act alone but are deeply entangled in networks in which algorithms and other actors mutually act on each other, whether that be the chair of the parish board, who obviously did not spend enough time looking at posts from CofS, communications directors considering what and when to post and strategizing about how to boost visibility, or everyday people and parishioners who do or do not click on CofS posts, view them, or engage with them. Algorithms, then, are mediators that translate and change whatever other actors they are connected to or interact with. These actors include everything and everyone including: those designing websites and platforms to give algorithms a prominent role or those who “game” the algorithmic system to increase their own content’s visibility; website users who accept cookies, thereby opening up their personal preferences and information to algorithmic use; and directors of communication who spend money on the creation of digital content, including the use of “paid media” strategies to increase publicity and visibility on digital platforms. Moreover, algorithms are clearly mediators in the ongoing performance and reshaping of the collective, as they participate in a process of translation, and push content into personalized feeds.<sup>11</sup> Thus, they play an outsized role in digital spaces, carrying meaning by and through their very coexistence and interaction with other mediators. Church practitioners might discover, for instance, that a pre-recorded devotion is all of a sudden widely spread online, receiving numerous likes (to their delight!)—while other practitioners are disappointed, wondering why *their* pre-recorded messages, films, or worship services have only accrued a handful of likes. The network, then, extends to the bodies and emotions of the human actors involved, causing joy, fueling rivalry, and prompting disappointment. In this way the line between online and offline is blurred: the network is simultaneously at work online and onsite.

While we are aware of this complexity, and do not seek to flatten the multiplicity inherent to digitality in all its multifarious permutations, we will still for the sake of analytical clarity use the concept “digital media” to refer to these assemblages. The plural form of the word —“media”—helpfully serves as a reminder of the true nature of the actor here called *digital media*. To the wonder and sometimes bafflement of practitioners in our study, this new actor, digital media, meant that human and non-human actors became connected in new and complex ways. They used “digital media” as an umbrella term for this new actor, while at the same time being clear that they also recognized, paradoxically, this term contained within it multiple actors. This was evident not least in their use of the terms “new” and “old” digital media. Some digital media, such as Zoom, Teams, and other digital platforms used to record devotions and worship services, were new to them. Other



kinds of digital media were “old”: the use of smartphones and iPads for filming videos or taking pictures, and the creation of posts on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, etc. And yet, while these latter platforms were familiar to them from the pre-pandemic, onsite-first church world, they felt they had to interact with these “old” digital media in new ways, and to a considerably greater extent, than before the pandemic. The entry of digital media into the network of this parish, then, translated church life. It is no wonder, then, that the practitioners involved described this as a transition from “being church the old way to being church online;” that is, “the new way”.

### 3.1.3. Digital Media as a Mimetic Toolbox and Mimetic Rivalry

Once this notion of a “visibility contest” was advanced by the study practitioners, we as researchers sought to understand it better via Norwegian author Lena Lindgren’s description of social media platforms as a *mimetic toolbox*, and introduced this concept to the practitioners in the group interviews. Lindgren draws on René Girard’s theory of *mimetic desire* and *mimetic rivalry* to ask whether technology strengthens the mimetic nature of human beings, and if social media in particular is inherently mimetic by its very nature (Lindgren 2020, p. 55).<sup>12</sup> She writes:

Social media platforms are created by means of mimetic principles. A framework for precisely mediated desire, in which *everyone can behold each other* as imitators and models at the same time. Additionally, everyone is equipped with a *mimetic toolbox* (sharing, reposting, retweeting), *which enables the distribution of visibility*. (Lindgren 2020, p. 63, our emphasis)

Lindgren here helps illuminate the experiences described by the practitioners we interviewed. With every other parishes’ social media footprint visible to everyone with an internet connection, and the “mimetic toolbox (sharing, reposting, retweeting)”, with its *distribution of visibility* quantifying and empowering engagement, a comparison between the practitioners’ own parishes and others emerged. It was not just church leadership; digital platforms made it possible for various congregations within the parish to compete with each other as well. Without these social media platforms, the network would be completely altered, alongside the mode of visibility being enacted.

Most practitioners confirmed that Lindgren’s concepts made sense to them, especially those who had brought the language of contest and visibility up in the first place. Notably, this parish had a history marked by competition between its various units and congregations. As the lead pastor reflected:

I can recognize the narrative of competition. Not towards other parishes [but among the congregations within *our* parish]. Yet, this fear-driven need of being visible. We do not quite keep up [...] We have a history of internal competition between four different districts/congregations [within the parish]. The contagious mimesis of snowballing. Especially at the beginning of the pandemic. I experienced a great sense of competition [...] We had to be visible.

However, some of the practitioners from the parish (who had *not* brought these issues up for discussion previously) spontaneously replied, when introduced to the concept of *mimetic rivalry*, “I did not recognize this rivalry mindset. I have not thought about it at all. Not within the parish, not between parishes. Perhaps I have been too visible!” Another practitioner from the same parish then chimed in to emphasize how she would rather find *inspiration* from looking at other parishes’ online presence: “It can be generous. We don’t have to compete!” However, later in the conversations, these same practitioners appeared to change their minds:

But actually, the number of views. I have felt rivalry in that area. Why does this parish have 5000 views while we have only had 300? Views are interesting from a psychological perspective. What a lot of people like, you [automatically] think you ought to like.

Here, the practitioner seems to confirm the theory of mimetic desire and mimetic rivalry afforded by social media platforms. Lindgren's concepts are thus a good illustration of the agency non-human actors bring to bear on digital media, and the influence they have on the networks which enmesh practitioners.

#### 3.1.4. Digital Media as an Ethos of Quantification

Beyond the mimetic rivalry of Lindgren's account, there is a further dimension to the network logic of digital media, which Lagerkvist identifies. She describes how the actors involved in social media networks are deeply embedded in an *ontology of numbers*, and characterized by an *ethos of quantification*. In Lagerkvist's argument, this dimension of *metric media* is closely connected to the belief that digital media promotes limitlessness, creativity, and unfettered possibility—with the resulting networks assembled or ordered toward a *mode of visibility and perfection*.

As opposed to this ordering toward perfection and limitlessness, qualities such as vulnerability, suffering, and limitation are often made invisible (Lagerkvist 2022, pp. 1–12, 107–9). Practitioners of both parishes voiced strikingly similar critiques against the mode of visibility they perceived churches were participating in online. They questioned the church's participation in a competition for people's attention:

What does it mean for the church to use social media platforms when they can also be considered 'a mimetic toolbox'? To what extent should the church contribute to amplifying 'an economy of attention' in which various actors compete for people's attention?

Another one added: "Given this reality, what should the role of the church be?" The practitioners, then, called for critical theological reflection to guide the church in dealing with this phenomenon in a responsible way. They discussed the tension that emerges between what the church would like to convey and preach and what is enacted and mediated in digital spaces:

It concerns how to view the church and what kind of church we would like to be. We want to be a church open to everyone . . . and that it [life] does not always end up as we had imagined it to be, and that is what we would like to communicate. At the same time, the carefully pre-recorded devotions and services that the congregation publishes can easily end up being 'perfect' for better and for worse.

Practitioners agreed that they were hesitant to share recordings that were deficient or "not good enough". As one of them remarked: "I don't want it to be on Facebook for all eternity if I make a mistake when reciting The Lord's Prayer".

Here, we find expressed a conundrum: the paradox of (im)perfection. To be human, to be a church, requires an openness to imperfection, according to these parishioners. Intimacy and fellowship are enacted in concrete ways via the recognition of vulnerability and limitation. At the same time, the very logic of digital media and social media platforms tends to reward perfection, or the appearance of perfection. Lagerkvist's analysis of digital media as *limitless* and therefore affording *perfection* might help us understand why this network assembles towards such a paradox, where a mode of visibility and perfection dominates despite the human actors' ideal of vulnerability as a display of *imperfection*.

In the last workshop discussion, an insight emerged among the practitioners. They came to the conclusion that the visibility contest afforded by the new actor of digital media was not really anything new:

Marketing and competition. We have talked quite a lot about competition, and this potential [. . .] in digital media. *We have also talked about statistics, but not so much about how it is exactly the same thing.* How many people do you have in your youth ministry? It [numbers] becomes a measurement of how good things are. Now we have many confirmands . . . it would not be so good if we were only 15. That is also a comparison and is clearly related to what we talked about earlier.

Another one commented: “Yes, digital media makes numbers visible in a new way. But statistics are also important”. This practitioner foregrounded how statistics are used as a tool in the distribution of resources: “After two years of using digital media this way it is possible to detect patterns of what is being spread/shared. When I [as a leader] am going to make decisions about how to prioritize our work, we need to be wise”.

Rivalry between colleagues, competitors, and even congregations is nothing new, to be sure, but digital and social media are nevertheless significant actors that act on, and make visible, these age-old dynamics of rivalry and competition in new ways. The increased focus on digital media and its attendant metrics have made visible the already existing significance of statistics and numbers as a sign of success—a logic that, too, is nothing new. Nevertheless, this new actor, digital media, has contributed to an opening up of the black box of an ontology of numbers, in which the online visibility contest described by church practitioners above can be understood as an extension and an amplification of an existing ethos of quantification—an ethos has been at work before the pandemic, but perhaps in different, less extensive, and less visible ways.

However, digital media are not static actors. Following Lagerkvist, we believe these qualities of *metric media* are not fixed—that is, digital media do not *necessarily* have to move the networks they enact towards modes of visibility and perfection. Instead, the possibility exists for digital media to be *caring media*—enacting a network that moves towards a mode of authenticity and imperfection. To this possibility we turn now.

### 3.2. Towards a Mode of Authenticity and Imperfection

[The evening devotions] mean something. It is the most important part of my ministry [...] I don’t approach devotion as a production but as worship. We worship together despite being in different places [...] It is also something continual. Every Thursday evening until Christmas. At the same time. Continuity. (Kristian, pastor)

*Kristian*, as we call him, is a pastor and preacher who offered digitally mediated evening devotions once a week during the pandemic. He works in the same parish as the parishioners above, who first surfaced the issue of a “visibility contest”. By exploring the network in which *Kristian* is entangled, and his interactions with other actors in it, our analysis uncovered a remarkable countertendency. The same analytical questions drove our work: what are significant actors in this network and how are they connected? What modes are enacted? What are salient features of these modes?

Here, we found evidence of translations that assembled the larger network in which *Kristian* played a small part toward, not the modes of visibility and perfection outlined earlier, but rather a mode of authenticity and imperfection—allowing for a caring, anonymous, spiritual intimacy and, ultimately, the creation of an ethos of care.

#### 3.2.1. Enacting Simplicity, Authenticity, and Imperfection

*Kristian* was experienced with digital media and had previously been engaged in work with local television. He was used to interacting with actors (human and non-human) in digital media networks in their various constellations. Given his experience, he became a significant actor in the parish’s digitally mediated presence and digital strategy during the pandemic.

To *Kristian*, the evening devotions he facilitated did not require much planning and preparation. They were unpretentious and down-to-earth, characteristics expressed in the choice of non-human actors he chose to employ, including everyday things such as the hymnal, a Bible, the lectionary text from the previous Sunday, a text on baptism, a prayer book, and a guitar. In one recording, he tunes the guitar on camera and selects the hymns to sing in “real time”, chatting with listeners as he does so. Even though he often had to multitask, doing so did not stress him out, which *Kristian* attested to in individual interviews we conducted with him. His “see how the sausage is made” approach and unassuming demeanor created a climate of authenticity—a model of *imperfection*.

The digitally mediated network that was enacted by Kristian and the evening devotions he led contained another crucial actor: the *structure* of the devotions themselves. They took place at the same time in the evening, on the same weekday, week in and week out, and were livestreamed from the same physical space. Despite being an invisible part of this network, this stable structure is still a salient actor, without which the community of worshipers who gathered for devotions (see below) would have been different, or even nonexistent. The repetitive structure lent itself to the everyday; the rhythmic nature of it precluded Kristian from the perceived necessity of having to preach the “best sermon ever” every time. Its difference from a pre-recorded, professional production that aims for perfection is striking.

The digitally mediated devotions were livestreamed on Facebook and Instagram from Kristian’s living room by means of his own smartphone and iPad—a setup that did not allow for retakes or edits. It was neither a professional Swedish Television production broadcasting a worship service from the cathedral, nor the typical pre-recorded devotion or worship service from a CofS congregation during the pandemic, all of which required significantly more sophisticated technical equipment and human resources. On the contrary, these devotions made minimal demands on the human and non-human actors involved. Consequently, the obvious *absence* of advanced technical equipment (and the attendant team of professionals often required to operate such equipment!), became an actor in and of itself, thus affording simplicity, authenticity, and imperfection.

### 3.2.2. Enacting Anonymous Spiritual Intimacy and an Ethos of Care

Notably, Kristian’s digital setup also allowed for a higher degree of interaction from the participants. In an interview, Kristian commented: “This small format . . . is more fun to livestream. Then it is happening now”. This orientation to the *now* reflects Kristian’s emphasis that digitally mediated worship is a *communal practice*. Digital media emerges as a salient actor again—but this time affording *interaction* instead of an ontology of numbers. Kristian himself explicitly foregrounds the importance of interaction, especially through intercession:

*It is interaction.* They can send in prayer requests, [a feature] which was added as we went along. They send them in as they write their comments. They are not so many, 20–25 persons [. . .] They comment on one another’s prayer requests. There is more interaction here than when being onsite. It is part of the format [. . .] I respond to comments. One space. On the one hand, *it is intimate*. Greater proximity than in a sanctuary. Everyone sees the conversations [in the comments]. One is visible. On the other hand, though, [being] anonymous and [safeguarding one’s] integrity. It happens that I am bombarded with prayer requests. ‘I feel so calm with you,’ they might comment. It is the intimate format that people are mostly attracted to [. . .]. (Kristian, our emphasis)

In this quote, the caring dimension of digital media as an actor, itself intimately connected to the ability to comment and interact while engaging in the online devotional experience, comes to the fore. Simply removing digital media as an actor, by returning to onsite-only evening devotions, for example, would significantly change the network and its affordance. Nevertheless, despite the interactivity afforded by the devotion’s digital platform, the most important actor here is undoubtedly Kristian. He functions as a mediator without whom the network would collapse. In one of the devotions we watched, he nudges the actor that is digital media into functioning as caring media—with an act as simple as encouraging the participants to write prayer requests in the chat, and then offering to pray for them.

Following, perhaps, Kristian’s example, the devotional participants themselves engaged with digital media tools as caring media, too—by commenting on each other’s prayer requests and offering encouragement, despite not knowing one another. Here, another key actor emerges: the *community* of listeners and the preacher who synchronically participate in the digitally mediated act of worship. This community consists of several human and

non-human actors (Kristian and the listeners with their phones, iPads, computers, and Facebook app or browser, each placed in various geographically distinct spaces all over the country, though most of them were local to Kristian's parish) who act upon one another, most typically by inviting, writing, and commenting on comments.

In sum, *Digital media*, then, appears as a mediator that typically "modif[ies] a state of affairs by making a difference". The resulting changes typically relate to visibility, as we have seen. However, in this network with Kristian as a key actor, the use of digital media did not assemble actors towards perfection. Instead, the network is ordered in such a way that imperfection is enacted and made visible—including imperfections that are not usually visible in onsite Sunday morning worship in CofS, at least not intentionally. As opposed to a regular CofS worship service, which often takes place in a large sanctuary with people who are, more or less, strangers, digital media in Kristian's network creates a space characterized by intimacy and proximity, while nevertheless maintaining the possibility of anonymity, thus safeguarding the integrity of the participants. As opposed to the network described above, in which digital media assembled the network towards a mode of visibility and perfection, this network is ordered towards a mode of authenticity and imperfection. As a result, the visibility contest is replaced by an anonymous spiritual intimacy, characterized not primarily by an ethos of quantification but by an ethos of care.

#### 4. A Non-Dichotomous Approach to Digitally Mediated Preaching

The discussion in this section is twofold. Firstly, we discuss how the results of the analysis can be understood theoretically, drawing on Lagerkvist's media theory of limits, and theologically, in relation to Deanna A. Thompson's work on "the virtual body of the suffering Christ". Secondly, we turn to the question raised in the introduction of the article: how can we, as homileticsians, engage more effectively with digitally mediated preaching?

##### 4.1. Between Perfection and Imperfection

How might the results of our analysis be understood theoretically and theologically?

One might argue that Kristian's conscious interaction with digital media should rather be understood in terms of a "tactical vulnerability", a strategy, perhaps even a cynical one, that shares vulnerability on social media only in order to gain likes and visibility—and thus we have only snuck in a logic of metric media and an ontology of numbers through the backdoor. According to Lagerkvist, vulnerability can become a trademark or commodity used to manipulate and generate attention and sales (Lagerkvist 2022, pp. 94–97). While we take seriously this possibility, we nevertheless find it more likely to interpret Kristian's case as a straightforward example of authenticity through imperfection. Our argument is based on his emphasis on how important the digitally mediated devotions are to him personally and as a pastor, foregrounding it as "worshiping together". He expresses no worry about the relatively low number of participants. His priority is on interaction, pastoring, and care, rather than displaying a perfect performance that attracts a large viewership.

Theologically, this mode of authenticity and imperfection can be understood as the "virtual body of the suffering Christ", in the words of Thompson (Thompson 2016). Drawing on Martin Luther's theology of the cross, Thompson argues that theologians ought to begin their theologizing at the foot of the cross, where they would discover that God is present where God is least expected to be—a call to pay attention to God's hidden presence in pain and suffering and witness how God works *in unexpected places* to bring redemption and healing. She applies this to virtual settings, specifically calling upon the church to embody a *cruciform media ethic* (Thompson 2016, pp. 70–71; 2020, p. 20). We argue that the network assembled around Kristian is such a cruciform media ethic at play. It constitutes "the virtual body of the suffering Christ".

Thompson also points to the possible advantages of "the virtual" in the church's calling to tend to the suffering. For example, a sick or disabled person might find it easier to interact with others in digital spaces, where the affliction of her body is not the center of

attention. Likewise, the other worshippers in Kristian's network seemed to be aided by the virtuality of the setting. Digital media allowed them to show vulnerability and participate in intimate prayer in ways they would most likely neither be able nor willing to do in a typical onsite CofS worship service.

#### 4.2. Beyond the Virtual/Real and Message/Media Divides

What, then, are the implications for homiletical engagement with digitally mediated preaching? From an ANT perspective, the divide between virtual and real does not exist. As previously mentioned, ANT views the real as enacted in the relations and interactions between human and non-human actors in *dynamic ever-changing networks of relations*. Both the visibility contest described by church practitioners, and the spiritual intimacy of Kristian's evening devotions, as enacted in their respective networks, also involve bodies and emotions as well as material objects and spaces. Based on our analysis, then, we follow Thompson in making the case that "virtual" is not in contrast to "real". Instead, the virtual is a continuation of the real since we engage in it with our bodies, which are situated in the material world. Virtual worlds impact us and shape our embodied lives (Thompson 2016, p. 25). In opposition to ontology-oriented homileticians who claim that digitally mediated preaching is called into question by the incarnation, and that "real" human bodies are opposed to "virtual" realities and/or bodies, we argue with Thompson that "real, embodied reality and virtual reality are always inextricably intertwined" (Thompson 2020, p. 19). Indeed, real and virtual are different ways of being embodied as part of one unified creation.

Moreover, as Thompson holds, the continuity between real and virtual reflects Paul's understanding of the relationship between the local and universal church. Paul describes the church as the body of Christ. It is local, just like the local congregation in Corinth, where Paul spent a great deal of time forming "networks". And yet, as he moved on physically to other geographic regions, he claimed in his letters to still be a part of this network that he calls the body of Christ, affirming in his writings that this "virtual" body, despite his physical absence from the Corinthians, is nonetheless a continuation of the real (Thompson 2016, p. 43). Similarly, the community that gathers to participate in the weekly digitally mediated devotions is an enactment of "the virtual body of Christ", spread out in space (though not, in this case, time).

Socio-material sensibilities, such as the ANT, move the discussion beyond dichotomies of real/virtual. As such, it offers a theoretically and theologically informed way forward for homileticians who are not ready to dismiss digitally mediated preaching as "less" incarnational than onsite preaching in the local church.

Furthermore, a socio-material lens, such as that of ANT, offers other advantages. Message- and media-oriented approaches to digitally mediated preaching, which are common trajectories taken by many homileticians who write about digitality, both tend to understate certain key aspects of digital media. Firstly, the message-oriented trajectory often neglects important actors in a network, rendering them intermediaries, or vessels, simply transporting a meaning or a message but not impacting the contents or the network itself. In contradistinction, ANT attends to the role non-human actors such as digital media play in nudging a network towards a certain mode, thereby changing the network, its actors, and the messages contained therein.

In contrast, the media-oriented trajectory pays too much attention to only *one* actor, the medium or format, while downplaying the influence of human actors, such as Kristian, and denying them considerable agency in any given network, precluding their ability to nudge the network towards a different mode. Using ANT as an analytical lens, then, enables a non-media-centric approach that balances agency, actors, media, and message. This approach avoids the lure of attributing too much significance to the affordances of media, while simultaneously drawing attention to hidden material actors within digital media, such as various social media platforms and their specific products and features, and including invisible actors such as algorithms. Instead, ANT allows for fine-grained

analyses of the multifarious interactions between various human and non-human actors assembled in networks, as we hope to have demonstrated in our analysis. We make the case that such a socio-material approach is a helpful contribution to the field of digital homiletics.

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## Notes

- 1 The research project was inspired by Theological Action Research (TAR). See for example (Cameron 2010; Watkins 2020).
- 2 In the original project, the seven congregations were studied and analyzed separately. In this article, though, such a distinction is not made.
- 3 In one of the groups the second workshop turned into individual interviews due to illness. The third workshop took place as a common workshop and group interview with practitioners from both parishes.
- 4 For a similar use of terminology, see (Cameron 2010).
- 5 For a detailed account of methods and theories, see (Uppsala: Svenska kyrkan, 2022 and in particular Idestrom and Kaufman 2022a; 2022b, pp. 18–20). The two most important theoretical perspectives introduced in this sub-project were a socio-material sensibility (ANT) in a very simplified fashion and Lindgren's use of Girard's theory of mimesis (Lindgren 2020).
- 6 While there are differences between Latour and Law in their approaches to ANT, they also share some of the most profound characteristics of ANT, and we do not distinguish between them in this paper.
- 7 We have conducted literature searches in databases such as JSTOR, ORIA, homiletical journals such as the *Homiletic, International Journal of Homiletics*, in Practical Theological journals such as the *International Journal of Practical Theology* and *Tidsskrift for praktisk teologi*.
- 8 Gaining this insight from laboratory studies, a microscope, for example, emerged as a significant actor in the knowledge construction of the laboratory.
- 9 For a helpful introduction to how ANT can be used in an anthropological study (in this case of Christianity in China) and some of ANT's critics, see (Chambon 2020, p. 6ff).
- 10 See (Mannerfelt 2022) in this special issue.
- 11 Latour uses the word translation to describe "a relation that does not transport causality but induces two mediators into coexisting". (Latour 2005, p. 108).
- 12 These observations from the material sparked the idea of drawing on René Girard's theory of mimesis, and mimetic desire in particular, (Girard 1987) as an analytic device.

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