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ICT and religious tradition: the case of Mount Athos

Pavlo Tanasyuk, Cambridge University

Chrisanthi Avgerou, LSE

Address for communication:

C. Avgerou

Information Systems and Innovation Group

London School of Economics

Houghton Street

London WC2A 2AE

C.Avgerou@lse.ac.uk

Abstract

ICT is understood to be closely associated with the shaping of late modernity. It constitutes one of its fundamental and distinctive features and is a product of its socio-economic institutions. Yet, it is increasingly taken up by traditional communities. The core question of this paper is whether the encounter of ICTs with cultures that have not embraced the values and ways of life of modernity gives rise to alternative perceptions and enactments of socio-technical ensembles. Do traditional communities disentangle the ICT artefact from the institutional context of modernity and appropriate it in their own culture and social order? Is there a potential fusion of ICT with non-modern cultures that leads to transformative effects of either the endogenous culture or the taken-for-granted 'modern' meaning of ICT value? Or is the take up of ICT, loaded with the meanings and values it inherited in its context of modernity, just eroding traditional culture and bringing them closer to modernity?

We address such questions by exploring the meanings and consequences of ICT in the community of monasteries on Mount Athos that was established in Byzantine times and remained largely isolated from most institutions of modernity. This is an early stage in what we intend to make a longitudinal research, and not surprisingly, our findings at this stage are inconclusive. We found a mix of attitudes and ICT-related practices among the monks and different attitudes towards the information processing/storage and the communication functions of ICT. But overall, adoption of ICTs is increasing on Mount Athos and we identify areas in which potential changes are under way and which merit further research.

Introduction

An endlessly proliferating array of ICT artefacts, creatively harnessed in the performance of multiple information communication and processing tasks, have become a fundamental feature of contemporary modernity. Continuous ICT-enabled innovation in all types of organizations has been simultaneously a product and a key constituent part of the three most dominant institutions of society at the beginning of the 21st century, namely scientific R&D, free market economy, and the military. Consequently, ICT innovation is deeply implicated in shaping the twin processes of

‘development’ and ‘globalization’, influencing a particular orientation of social change that is widely seen as universally improving human life conditions.

To be sure, both ‘development’ and ‘globalization’, and even more so their combination – development through globalization – are contested in the arenas of political activism and academic debate. Perhaps more importantly, some of the most basic principles of rational economic behaviour and science-informed action that are understood to characterize modernity seem to be circumvented in everyday life conduct across the globe. One of the paradoxes of late modernity is the continuation, if not the revival, of religious communities which maintain a strong sense of identity based on traditional values and beliefs that in many ways are at odds with the rationalities of modern science and economics. Do such communities perceive it to be incompatible to their way of life, or embrace it? If the latter, as anecdotal stories and images circulated by the media suggest, do they appropriate the potential of the material properties of the technology and reconstitute its functionality, or adopt more or less intact the socio-technical performativity of its original context? Does the introduction of ICTs affect the spiritual character that is prominent in traditional religious communities?

The motivation for writing this paper for the IFIP WG9.4 conference stemmed from a discussion at an earlier IFIP conference on ICT policy in Pretoria, South Africa in September 2008, which involved many participants from the preceding IFIP WG9.4 workshop at the same venue. The discussion concerned the question of the existence of alternative perceptions and knowledges regarding ICT and society. Several participants claimed that different societies foster significantly different ways of thinking about the value of ICT and the way it is associated with socio-economic change. Moreover, it was suggested that such differences may stem from differences of culture.

The research we present in this paper explores these questions in a study of the traditional and isolated Christian Orthodox community of Mount Athos. We believe that because of the rather extreme traditional character of this community and its distinctive religious culture, its study can be a revealing example of the fusion of traditional life and ICT as a technology of modernity *par excellence*, thus providing fertile ground for the exploration of alternative perceptions of ICT and society.

The next section of this paper traces relevant theoretical ideas regarding ICT and the shaping of modern society; we draw mainly from theorists of modernity and cultural change. Then, we present the background of the religious community of Mount Athos, describe the way we conducted our research, and provide a short description of the technology uses at the monasteries. In the following section we discuss the perceptions and uses of ICTs, and their discernible consequences for the community. In the conclusions we summarise our main observations and identify further required research. In a nutshell, although the contact of this community with ICT is rather limited and too short in duration, and therefore we did not find the crystallization of any distinctive alternative meanings and transformational courses of action, we did discern challenges and contradictions that need to be further studied in order to explore the way a traditional community makes sense of ICTs, appropriates them, and positions itself in the modern world.

Modernity and ICT

Modernity can be viewed as a principal theoretical construct in evaluating and interpreting cultural and social formations (Misa *et al.*, 2003). Authors use the term with varying but overlapping meanings (Weber, 1958; Giddens, 1990; Bauman, 2000; Appadurai, 2005; Beck, 2008). A common approach is to view modernity as a historical project beginning in ancient Greece, transcending Christian times of Western societies and fulfilling itself with the Enlightenment (Foucault, 1984; Habermas, 1992; Nissen, 1998; Misa *et al.*, 2003). Much of this literature makes a distinction between traditional and modern societies. In a nutshell, in the former people conduct their affairs by adhering to ancestral values and social behaviour patterns of taken-for-granted validity. In the latter, people exercise reason to make choices according to the circumstances they face and, in effect, they give shape to their own biographies (Giddens, 1991).

Most analysts tend to agree that technological progress and advances in arts and science in general are among the most important aspects of what they call 'modernity'. Technology and modernity are seen as mutually defining each other (Adam, 1992); each one fundamentally and inevitably involves the other; 'technology is a truly distinctive feature of modernity' (Misa *et al.*, 2003). Before modernity, time and space were treated as inseparable and inherently interconnected, localised activities (Harvey, 1990; Giddens, 1990). Modern technological advances in the sphere of communication, computer technologies and technologies of travel are argued to have compressed time and as a result communities and individuals have started to lose their identity in this 'boundaryless space' where geography is nowhere (Bauman and Vecchi, 2004). Giddens conveys this view with the metaphor of phantasmagory:

'In conditions of modernity, place becomes increasingly phantasmagoric: that is to say, locales are thoroughly penetrated by and shaped in terms of social influences quite distant from them.' (Giddens, 1990: 19)

In particular, analyses of contemporary conditions of modernity elaborate on the transformative effects of ICT as a technology contributing to the flow of information, to mobility and to continuous innovation in all domains of human activity. Taking these ideas further, Bauman presents the contemporary 'modern' condition – which he calls 'liquid modernity' - as one characterized by its speed of change: the modern world has become obsessed with novelty (Bauman and Tester, 2001). This condition of modernity differs not only from traditional societies, but also from modernity that has been searching for and adhered to universal rational truths. In liquid modernity people constantly search for new solutions, as there is no longer an available guidebook for them to follow (Bauman, 2000). In the contemporary consumer society everything is characterized as new and unfamiliar; different food, fashions and people that we meet change our attitudes towards the 'strangers'.

'Ideally, nothing should be embraced by a consumer firmly, nothing should command a commitment till death do us part, no needs should be seen as fully satisfied, no desires considered ultimate.' (Bauman, 2000: 89)

The liquid phase of modernity can be characterized as the era 'of disembedding without re-embedding', where 'nothing but transience is durable' (Bauman, 1998), new values and rules have to be continually accepted as constant social change becomes integral to any society.

Local customs are diminished both in the search for discovery of ultimate truth through the rationality of science of solid modernity and the search for novelty of liquid modernity. A question, therefore, that arises from these theoretical perceptions of modernity is what happens to culture, if we take culture to mean forms of community life that encompass institutional conduct, structures, and modes of organization (Hand 2008). Do the cultural processes of globalization imply the preservation, lessening or disappearance of distinctive cultures as the identity of social groups?

A debate on this question is found in the literature on globalization. Early views of homogenization, or ‘Americanization’ of culture in the context of the discourse of globalization, gave way to more nuanced views of ‘*indigenization*’ Hannerz (1987), *glocalization*, as a combination of contradictory globalization and localization (Robertson, 1992; Bauman, 2003), and *hybridization* (Appadurai, 2005). Homogenizing processes, such as transnational business, worldwide spread of consumer products and clothing styles, advertising techniques and language hegemonies, are entangled with the export of particular local cultural features through immigration, travel or influence by neighbouring societies. Appadurai brings several examples of indigenization, such as the way western pop style music is mixed with local ‘colour’ and acquires different meanings in different places of the world. A much more complex picture of cultural variation emerges from his discussion of the cultural reproduction occurring in small groups of diasporas, deterritorialized communities and displaced populations. The reproduction of the cultural features of their original community context is mixed with the cultural influences of their new ‘home’ and international media. At the same time they also influence both, their original communities, fuelling their dreams and fears, and the new ‘homes’, exposing them to their cultural particularities. Such views suggest that multiple forms of modernity are created at the meeting points of different values and aesthetic criteria with technological development (Feenberg, 1995) and the word consists of hybridized rather than recalcitrantly distinctive cultures (Appadurai, 2005; Delanty and Rumford, 2005; Delanty, 2006; Lull 2000, 2007).

Yet, in contrast to this view, there is also a trend towards ‘fundamentalism’, meaning ‘the strict maintenance of the ancient or fundamental doctrines of any religion or ideology’ according to the Concise Oxford English Dictionary. Religion is a major cultural determinant, and a strong identifier in global as well as regional geopolitical conflicts. Our research sets out to explore the way the technologies that underpin liquid modernity and the widely observed hybridization of cultures are accommodated in fundamentalist religious communities. In the following section we present our case study of a religious community that has preserved its particular version of Christianity (the Orthodox church) and its Byzantine heritage for over a millennium.

Overview of the case study

Mount Athos, or in Greek Aghion Oros (Άγιο Όρος) which translates as Holy Mountain, is an autonomous state under Greek sovereignty and home to 20 Christian orthodox monasteries. Spiritually the monasteries are under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and monks come from across the world, but mostly from Balkan and Eastern European countries that follow the Eastern

Orthodox Church: Russia, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Romania, Serbia¹. Mount Athos was formally founded as a monastic community in 963. The peninsula protrudes into the Aegean Sea for some 60 km at a width of 10 km. Its beautiful slopes reach up to 2,033 m and it is not easy to get to some of the monasteries. The monastic community is both geographically and institutionally well protected. Access to Athos is only by sea and special permission is needed to go there. The number of visitors is limited to 100 per day. It is an all-male community and no female visitors are allowed.

In the Middle Ages, from the 10th century onwards, Mount Athos as well as many other monastic communities could be described as a cradle of innovation; new inventions were made within the monastic walls - most of them were in the field of agriculture and construction. Many innovative practices were also willingly adopted. Monasteries on Athos always had the latest technology of the time, as it is described by monks themselves, and supported by other researchers (Paganopoulos, 2006) however their appropriation of technology was always limited to what they needed to survive.

The early to late 20th century is often described as a period of decline for many monasteries on Athos (Speake, 2002); the number of monks dropped from 7,432 in 1902 to only 1,145 in 1971. Adoption of new technologies was blocked for almost the entire 20th century, as the community was preoccupied with the more daily needs of survival. During that period Athos was mostly populated by the old monks; the median age was well above 60 or in some monasteries even 70 years. This meant that people who were on the mountain left the world well before modern technological development touched the lives of citizens around the globe. On the other hand, their monastic life, until recent times, did not require much beyond the basic instruments of survival. This situation of decline was not only associated with internal problems on Athos but was also due to external political and social factors. Monks had only limited external sources and could only depend on themselves - it was a survival priority that led the monastic community to conduct a more *laissez-faire* way of life (Speake, 2002), allowing monks to retain profits from their work.

In effect, the Athos community, until recent years, was mostly untouched by technological developments of the 20th century and could be characterized as thoroughly traditional. Although Athos was faced with many transformational processes of 'western' society and was involved, mostly indirectly, in many of the political and societal processes of the 20th century, such as the formation of the European Union and the legislative changes regarding the autonomy of its member states, Mount Athos has preserved its autonomy, following their own rules. Their sovereignty is explicitly defined in the Greek constitution.

Recently, circa 1980, monasteries started to return to their traditional coenobitic way of life. The number of new monks and tourists also increased leading to greater restrictions for visiting. Monks characterize the current condition on Athos as a renewal; there are many newcomers, they are building roads, repairing houses and introducing ICTs.

Data collection

¹ 17 monasteries are predominantly ethnically Greek one is Serbian, one is Bulgarian, and one is Russian. There are also smaller clusters (cloisters and Sketes) of Romanian, Bulgarian and Russian monks.

Our research of the monastic communities of Mount Athos so far involved an extensive study of relevant published materials, a short trip to Ouranoupolis – the gate town to Athos for a period of three days during the summer of 2008, where individual interviews with monks, pilgrims, and people who are employed by the monasteries were undertaken, and an analysis of relevant documentation and observations. Further follow-up interviews with some of the interviewees on Athos, seeking additional information and clarifications, were conducted by email.

The inaccessibility of Athos and sensitivities of the monastic community poses particular constraints to our research. Only one of the authors, who is male, can go to Athos for the empirical study. At the beginning we had planned to conduct semi-structured interviews with monks and other stakeholders (pilgrims, workers). However, the researcher realised that it was difficult for monks to cooperate in answering questions in semi-structured interviews and he conducted mostly informal interview sessions which resulted in the collection of narratives, often presented in a form of personal stories. In these sessions the researcher led the interview by asking framing questions. These concerned the following particular topics:

- Questions to establish contact with respondents (paying attention to whether he was a monk or not), including control questions to test the logical non-discrepancy and trustworthiness of answers.
- Questions to understand the purposes of ICT uses on Athos; their goals, objectives of utilization, and timeline of changes so far.
- Questions aiming to find out the respondent's personal involvement with ICT, their motivation and utilization, as well as to uncover work-related and personal motivating factors.
- Questions to uncover their attitudes of individuals, their concerns about ICT usage, and other behaviour aspects.
- Questions regarding views of globalisation, processes of change in society in general, the Athos community in particular, its traditional and moral principles, and way of life.

Language presented a few problems with the exception of one worker who didn't communicate in English well so it was necessary to use a translator. Appropriate clothing had to be worn during interviews to help generate trust on the side of interviewee, as monks were sensitive to visual appearance. Monks were generally positive and even enthusiastic in responding to our invitation, but not very cooperative when directly enquired about their usage of ICT. Since it proved difficult to construct a full narrative of life with ICT on the Mount, our empirical study concentrated on particular topics that are associated with implementation and usage of ICT on Athos. After the trip to Athos additional data were collected by investigating the online presence of the monks as well as by studying their posts on the Internet, thus complementing the research with information that was not disclosed during the interviews.

The usage of ICT on Athos

Different monasteries on Athos have different rules. Individual perceptions towards technology are also extremely heterogeneous. For example, at the Vatopedi monastery, which is believed to be one of the most 'high-tech' on the Mount, with a population of 150 monks, only 8-10 use computers on a regular basis. Monasteries with a larger number of new and younger monks (the Vatopedi for example) are more

modern and tend to use computer technology more extensively than more traditional ones (the Esphigmenou for example) with a smaller number of newcomers. Location also plays an important role in such tendencies and globalisation processes have less effect on remote monasteries.

Each monastery and even some scetes² have a direct telephone line and a fax, and Mount Athos has a well designed and maintained web presence: <http://www.inathos.gr/athos/en/>. Every monastery has its own email but they don't make their addresses public. Currently there are six fully operational WiMAX stations that provide high-speed internet access (60 Mbps) and IP telephony covering nearly 100 percent of Mount Athos. This innovation is relatively new, implemented in August 2008, and only six monasteries are using the network so far; however the broadband opens new perspectives on adoption and usage of ICT on the Mount.

Computer technology is currently utilized on Athos in various ways with different degrees of commitment. We identified the following categories of ICT use.

ICT for conducting business. The monks who are engaged in the major business activities of the community -mainly harvesting and exporting forestry products - use MIS and accounting tools unreservedly. They also engage in e-commerce, both for selling and buying: two monasteries run internet shops to sell icons, books and CD-ROMs and occasionally monks will use the Internet to shop for items they need.

Communication technologies. Some monks use email and VoIP. However, in general they tend to avoid communication with perfect strangers – monks tend to communicate only with other monastic communities around the world, although they communicate with strangers in their economic activities. Even monasteries which run Business to Consumer E-commerce sites avoid direct communication with customers - other people sell the goods and run the shop, while monks just give advice; as one employee suggested: “*So we have some guidelines, or ask them in some mails what to replay. That way they avoid the direct communication with the world.*” Hence appropriation of computer technology on Athos often doesn't include the communicative component. Nevertheless, with the recent introduction of high-speed wireless Internet and VoIP this may soon change.

Technology for the preservation of culture. Currently monasteries are collaborating with the Greek government and the European Union in digitization projects aiming to preserve their cultural heritage. It is interesting to note that these collaborative projects were initiated by the monks themselves. They also use autoCAD for architectural plans and the design of a solar electric station. They use digital photography, electronic publishing tools, and produce multimedia CD-ROMs about monasteries.

Discussion

Personal attitudes to the use of ICT

The peculiarity of the Athos community is that it is not a closed society. As an entirely male community in which no children have been born for many centuries, it is constantly relying for its survival to people entering the community from outside. This situation introduces an interesting phenomenon: They have to accept monks who by definition are more ‘modern’ than their predecessors in order to maintain the

² The habitation of a hermit.

community with its traditional heredity and succession of values. Thus people in their 30s, who are joining the monasteries on Athos now, know about information and communication technology not by hearsay but have first-hand experience and possess substantial technological knowledge. The prevailing majority of fresh monks have university degrees, not only in Theology but also in Physics, Chemistry and Computer Science. However, in order to become a monk, they have to detach themselves from the social institutions of modernity and only then are they accepted into the brotherhood, embedding themselves into the communal monastic life. This act of de-modernisation is neither easy nor is it an instant process. But in contrast to our modern world, there are traditions and rules that have to be followed, paraphrasing Bauman (2000); there are 'beds' furnished for 're-embedding'. The community of Mount Athos also acquires some of the individual's properties on the way to this mutual socio-technical discourse (Giddens, 1982); this process of transformation is not instant and both parties acquire properties reciprocally.

It should be noted that the community of Mount Athos is much more diverse than it is usually perceived by some researchers (Sherrard, 1960) and cannot be treated as a monolithic entity. Even if they are under the direct control of, and obedient to, the Constantinople Patriarch, different monasteries may have different rules and monks can have concessions, as a result *de jure* 'collective' traditionalism sometimes coexists with *de facto* 'personal' modernity. Levels of personal modernity³ differ on Athos; even within one monastery monks perceive technology differently and have strong polarization of views. This division is often associated with the age of the monks, with the younger monks having more positive attitudes towards ICT.

Some monks are very active in programming forums, as our study of their online behaviour in the form of online posts since the year 2000 showed. Their involvement in these forums extends beyond the needs of the monastery and can be viewed as a personal intellectual challenge. An interesting effect of a monk's work at the monastery as a programmer is that he can actually commodify time; he can redistribute his work in such a way as to still have time for the 'leisure' activities of programming, even though they are close to his duties. Commodification of time is argued to be a modern phenomenon (Appadurai, 2005). The behaviour of programmer monks is interesting as it shows that even if present levels of ICT on Athos and practices associated with its usage may be deemed sufficient for the needs for which they were called upon (administration, record keeping, digitizing of manuscripts, etc), the individual interests of the monk and his attitudes towards the internet-enabled communication stimulates the development of new practices and leads to the adoption of new information technologies on Athos. Thus, in addition to the various ICT projects launched by the administration of the monasteries and their businesses, the monks who are ICT savvy and keep contact with virtual communities are a continuous source of technology innovation through exercising their personal interests.

Issues of de-traditionalization

'Classical' monastic tradition implies limited external communication; currently computer technology on Athos is mostly utilized in such a way as to avoid the

³ There were some attempts to develop a theoretical framework for evaluation of personal modernity levels (Yang 1988; 1993; 1999; 2000) but they were widely criticized (Hwang, 2003). In the current context I use it to address the attitudes towards usage of modern ICT.

communicative component, however other types of communication like mobile phones, have already become a part of local life. A radio station and mobile phones were introduced on Athos to call for help during emergency situations but now their usage is much more ubiquitous.

Introduction of communicative technologies on Athos may ultimately erode their traditional *disengagement* with the rest of the world, which can be viewed as one of the transformative effects on the time-space organization of the pre-modern condition (Giddens, 1990, 2008; Bauman, 2000)⁴. Tradition on Athos has formed a prism through which computer technology is viewed and appropriated with a local meaning. Monks do not perceive ICT as contributing to their main goal in the religious community, which is spiritual: it aspires to following the orthodox process of becoming free of sin and being united with God, ‘θέωσις’. However, those who use ICT value it for making things ‘easier and faster’. Perceived economic needs of the monastic communities lead monks to use communication technologies more extensively than ever before. Doing things faster and trying to avoid wasting time is a key characteristic of modern societies (Weber 1958), in contrast to the traditional perception and value of time.

Thus, for monks on Athos, there is an interesting mix of ‘instrumental rationality’ and religion. In the monks’ expressed ideals, ICT saves time for praying. Within their values and life style the achievement of efficiency gains from ICT use does not have the urgency that is usually expressed in the IS literature. Indicatively, one monk remarked: ‘we have all eternity to digitalize the manuscripts’. There lies, therefore an interesting question: In the modern western world, ‘instrumental rationality’ itself is promoted to the rank of religion. Does the precarious mix of spiritual goals and rational means for attaining them bear the possibility of ICT serving as the latter with the result of the erosion of the former?

The tension between instrumental thinking and behaviour towards rational economic and political goals and spiritual values is neither new nor should it be associated exclusively with the adoption of ICT. Monasteries generally, and Orthodox monasteries in particular, are renown for their business activities and political tactics to gain economic gains and power advantages in relation to secular states and other Christian Churches⁵. ICT with its inscribed instrumental logic, as for example in the ERP systems and e-commerce applications is not introducing a new logic and new values, but it may be reinforcing the values of economic gain in a competitive society and take the monks along the path of the constant search for innovation of liquid modernity.

In terms of space, the Athos community was always defined and limited by its location. Monks never attempted to extend their territory; on the contrary, they always had to defend their boundaries. Appadurai (2005) mentions that the difference between a strong and a weak society is between territory well guarded and territory open to intrusion. The territory of Mount Athos is guarded very carefully – physical

⁴ Even clocks on Athos show Byzantine time, which starts the 24-hour cycle at sunset. Some monasteries conducting business activities have to use two clocks.

⁵ Indicatively, at the time of the writing of this paper, the Greek media are preoccupied with the contestation of fairness, legal rights, and political wisdom of an exchange of land that was owned by one of the Vatopaidi monastery outside Athos with land owned by the Greek State.

boundaries of Athos are guarded by the military. However, there is no protection from social intrusion associated with the deployment of modern ICTs.

Before the introduction of ICT on Athos, monks were able to avoid direct encounters with perfect strangers without confining themselves to a cell. Even pilgrims that were always a part of a local socioscape on Athos were, to some extent, legitimized either by their orthodox religious beliefs or by the authorities who issued them with a permit to be on the Mount. Now, with a help of ICT, monks can potentially be approached by anyone whatever their intentions. Athonite monks have high levels of trust and ontological security within the local community; but so far risk levels are quite low as well. Their common faith can be seen as an institutional safeguard that protects them and becomes what Erikson (1993) calls a 'sign of trustworthiness in the community' which is often absent in modern 'liquid' times where life is often associated with a high level of risk and diminishing levels of trust (Beck, 2008). Traditional and especially religious communities do not have a developed risk culture (Giddens, 1990) and may not be able to foresee the consequences of virtual communication with strangers.

The potential tensions between preservation and dissemination of culture

As mentioned above, monasteries on Athos are initiating projects to transfer knowledge accumulated during the centuries to electronic media; three monasteries are already digitizing the manuscripts they possess. For example, the Vatopedi monastery together with the Greek government opened a tender for companies to bid for a project to digitize and systematize manuscripts, letters, books and visual material. But these projects of systematizing the storage of the knowledge and the cultural objects of the monasteries have implications for both their culture and their historically formed role.

The cultural objects that are being digitised have so far been preserved on Mount Athos by the continuity of practice of the Byzantine Christian Orthodox rituals. Manuscripts, icons, and various objects are inseparable parts of the conduct of life of the community. Extracted from the context of meanings and practices of the isolated religious community, and entered in the world which does not share its practiced culture, the digital images are images of relics. In this form of preservation Mount Athos becomes primarily an archive, i.e. items disembedded from a community's life context.

Another shift in the role and identity of the monasteries as preservers of Byzantine culture that is nurtured in the monasteries, stems from the new possibilities of opening access to the preserved knowledge and images of the cultural objects to the wider public. At present there is demand across the western world for opening up archives and providing access for education and various other purposes. With this prevailing view about the value of archives, the digitization of manuscripts, icons, photographs, etc. entails the possibility of a significant shift from the role of keeping an ancient culture alive, that Mount Athos has played for over a millennium, to a role of disseminator of knowledge about a bygone culture (Hand, 2008). The internet shops are an indication that the monasteries may indeed be interested in making their cultural heritage available to the rest of the world, particularly as this provides another source of income.

Conclusions

The case of Mount Athos demonstrates that current globalization processes are reaching even the most socially remote and traditional places on our planet. ICT is embraced by the monasteries of Athos as a benign and useful technology and our study shows that its introduction into the traditional community has not had immediate and *grand* transformational effects. At this stage, monks do not disentangle ICTs from the meanings attributed to them in their context of origin. They recognise them as useful mainly because of their potential efficiency effects in terms of information storage and processing, thus accepting the dominant perception of their value in modern societies. Those monks who opt to use them don't see them as incompatible to their spiritual goals, with the justification that they have the potential to save time for praying. We found no alternative articulated views about the nature of ICTs and their potential to enable social change. However there are some interesting observations that merit further research and continuing analysis.

First, ICT is too broad as a category of study. Different technologies attract different levels of interest and trust by the monks. Computerised information systems for the conduct of business, digital technologies for storage of knowledge, and design technologies are introduced without reservation. Communication technologies, on the other hand, such as email and the internet are at present used reluctantly and with suspicion of bearing intrusions. Further study is required to identify the particular technological artefacts, their perceived functionalities and their judgement about matching or contradicting the values and way of life of the community.

Second, the study shows that even in the strict monastic traditions of the Mount, there is individual agency in the appropriation of technologies. While the coenobium, that is community life, is still deeply traditional, there is significant space for personal modernity which results in idiosyncratic use of ICTs on Athos. There is no general agreement on the usage of ICT, but the current variety of attitudes doesn't appear to provoke a visible confrontation among monks. Research is needed to examine the way personal idiosyncratic uses of technologies affect the community overall. Among the aspects of influence that need to be studied are changes of values towards and patterns of communication with the world outside the community, and power relations, both within the community and its contact with the outside world.

Third, although our study did not find that ICT has immediate visible transformation effects on the religious community, it identified signs of potential transformative changes, such as increasing communication with the secular world beyond the peninsula; and the potential shift towards a role of dissemination of knowledge on an ancient culture. Longitudinal research will be needed to study whether and how such potential changes will be realised.

The research we present in this paper is limited in terms of data and exploratory in terms of analysis. We intend to follow up this research with a substantial ethnographic study aiming to understand daily life in the monastic community and the way ICT is accommodated into it. Moreover, better understanding of the way life on Mount Athos unfolds and the way it is associated with its surrounding world requires the study of the institutional context of the Churches (Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, and other national ecclesiastic hierarchies), the national states and the supranational organizations that influence and legitimate it.

Moreover, we need to make a further effort to unravel the combination of spiritual motivation and reasoning that underlies the apparent contradictions we observe in the traditional society of our study, its perceptions of value of various ICTs and their

particular appropriations. This may prove the most difficult task of our future research in this area. But we believe that exploring the non-rational motivations and aspirations for the appropriation and shaping of ICTs can significantly enrich existing theoretical explanations of the emerging ICT-mediated ways of life.

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