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Public Theology Facing Digital Spaces

Public theology, digital theology and changing spaces for theological reasoning

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Abstract: Digital technologies are increasingly transforming communication, culture, and the public sphere. These developments lead to new hybrid spaces and publics, propelling a cultural change that affects not only our understanding of public but also the way we think and act as public theologians. This article examines the implications of this change for a public theology in and for digital spaces in relation to current debates about digital theology.

Outlining different governances of digital public spaces, it reflects on the hermeneutical and epistemological implications for theological thinking of and in public spaces. Taking up the debates of digital theology, it highlights the challenges of changing theological models and concepts in the search for theologies of the digital.

Keywords: digitalization, digital theology, public spaces, citizen theology

1. Digital Spaces, Public Theology, and Digital Theology

Questions of space and place with reference to public theology have been subject to debate on public theology in the German context from the very beginning¹: Where does public theology take place? What and who is public theology related to? What might an appropriate public language and public engagement look like? Many of these questions are linked to the debate about the term public: who and where are the publics of theology? (How) does theology change if it speaks publicly and relates itself to one or more public? This fundamental debate also touches on the question of the geographic spaces of public theology—local, global, or glocal²—as well as the question of the social spheres of public theological speech—church, politics, or civil society.

On closer inspection the question of space and place of public theology is a double one: At first glance, it refers to the context of public theology and thus describes the space as a place of one's own theological thinking and action within its specific speaking context and conditions. On the other hand, and less obviously, this question of the context and locations is closely connected to the object of public theology: as public theology constitutively refers not only to theology itself—however it might be understood—but also to something external called “public,” public theology is formed and determined by the places and spaces in and for which it speaks.³

¹ See, for example, Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, Florian Höhne and Tobias Reitmeier, eds, *Contextuality and Intercontextuality in Public Theology: Proceedings from the Bamberg Conference 23.-25.06.2011*, (Münster: LIT, 2013).

² See on this debate in the Global Network for Public Theology Bedford-Strohm, Höhne and Reitmeier, eds, *Contextuality and Intercontextuality*. One background is the very different description of processes of globalization in Frederike van Oorschot, ‘Public Theology Facing Globalization’, in Bedford-Strohm, Höhne and Reitmeier, eds, *Contextuality and Intercontextuality*, pp. 225-31.

³ See van Oorschot, ‘Public Theology’, pp. 227, 229.

Talking about digital spaces adds another perspective to the aim of this text—that is, to deepen the understanding of context, space, and place. Digital media creates new spaces, structured by digital technologies, constituting interactions of information and communication.

Compared with the debates about the geographical space or social context of public theology, talking about digital space highlights another aspect of space and place: it emphasizes the medial structure of spaces and places. It seems like an addendum to the apparently independent questions about the context, subject, and issues of public theology. In public theology, the importance of the media in making theology public has been emphasized repeatedly. Here the media came into view primarily with regards the publics of theology.⁴ Digital media highlights anew the question of how exactly these processes of becoming public are to be described and how the digital publics are changing the how and where of the publics of theology. The digital space thereby reveals that the question of space and its medial conditions is not a question of conveying theology through medial representation, but rather a constitutional condition of public theology itself. The thesis I want to unfold is that the question of the space and place of public theology cannot be held subordinate to the question of the form and content of public theology: it is constitutively determined by space and place.

The question of the spaces of public theologies is a question of hermeneutic self-clarification, since self-knowledge and knowledge of the world are closely connected with the communication of thoughts and the exchange about them, as Kristin Merle points out.⁵ This has been true even before the establishment of digital spaces, of course, but reflection on these digital changes raises the question of the medial conditions of theology more clearly and so can

⁴ See Elaine Graham, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Public Theology in a Post-Secular Age*, (London: SCM Press, 2013), p. 85; Sebastian Kim, *Theology in the Public Sphere: Public Theology as a Catalyst for Open Debate*, (London: SCM Press, 2013), p. 13; Sebastian Kim, 'Editorial', *International Journal of Public Theology*, 6:2 (2012), 131-6 at 132; Dirkie Smit, 'Notions of the Public and Doing Theology', *International Journal of Public Theology*, 1:3 (2007), 431-54.

⁵ Kristin Merle, *Religion in der Öffentlichkeit: Digitalisierung als Herausforderung für kirchliche Kommunikationskulturen* (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2019), p. 418.

no longer be ignored. In this respect, the following considerations can also be understood as a stimulus for reflection on the medial conditions of public theology in any form.

The relation of theology and the digital has been the central concern of the debate about digital theology for some time now.⁶ The theological implications of digital spaces are part of this debate. To relate my thoughts in the field of public theology to the field of digital theology, some preliminary remarks are necessary.

In my view, the term digital theology currently describes an open research field, where the actors and programs seem to be very fluid. In the German context, the term was introduced by Johanna Haberer in 2015 and initially met with little response.⁷ In the English speaking context, the issues and aims of digital theology were summarized in 2019 by Peter Phillips, Kyle Schiefelbein-Guerrero and Jonas Kurlberg: at the time they were relating the founding initiative for a Global Network of Digital Theology hosted by the Centre for Digital Theology in Durham.⁸ According to Phillips *et al* digital theology pursues a double objective: ‘a theological reassessment of digitality and a digital reassessment of theology.’⁹ They state:

Digital Theology is about exploring what happens when digital tools or methods are applied to theology or theological tools to digital. Can we do online everything that we do offline: online sacraments, a digital hajj, communion with the other, pastoral care that transcends geographical and religious boundaries? . . . Digital Theology is

⁶ Peter Phillips, Kyle Schiefelbein-Guerrero and Jonas Kurlberg, ‘Defining Digital Theology: Digital Humanities, Digital Religion and the Particular Work of the CODEC Research Centre and Network’, *Open Theology* 5:1 (2019)29-43, doi: 10.1515/opth-2019-0003; Frederike van Oorschot, ‘Digital theology. Systematisch-theologische Perspektiven auf ein entstehendes Forschungsfeld’, *Verkündigung und Forschung* 65:2 (2020), 162-171, doi: 10.14315/vf-2020-650213.

⁷ Johanna Haberer, *Digitale Theologie: Gott und die Medienrevolution der Gegenwart* (München: Kösel, 2015).

⁸ Phillips, Schiefelbein-Guerrero, Kurlberg, ‘Defining Digital Theology. The definition emerged from the work in the CODEC project, which, affiliated with the University of Durham, dealt with the implications of digital change for biblical-exegetical studies, sermon, and church development. In 2017, the MA “Digital Theology” was introduced in Durham and since 2019 the research centre in Durham has been called Centre for Digital Theology” (<https://www.dur.ac.uk/digitaltheology/>). As part of a panel of the same name at the annual conference of the American Academy of Religion in November 2019, this text was also the founding document of the Global Network for Digital Theology.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

about asking how human beings might flourish within digital culture and about countering online human deficit disorder.¹⁰

Philips *et al* describe five waves in the development of digital theology:¹¹

1. The use of digital technology in communication and teaching
2. The use of digital technology in research (digital humanities broadly understood)
3. A reflection on digital technologies and its cultural implications
4. A prophetic and ethical appraisal of digitality
5. Combining these developments in an interdisciplinary perspective

The authors already see parts of the first four waves of these developments realized and their work develops the fifth stage. Overall, however, they observe a great reluctance in theology to look at digital technologies and developments.¹² Philips *et al* relate the emergence of digital theology to the development of digital humanities. At the same time, digital theology is closely linked to developments in digital religion, which describes and reflects on the phenomenon of religious practices in digital media in similar waves.¹³

The typological description of Philips *et al* leads to a massive expansion of the term digital theology and, at the same time, limits it to two main relations of theology and the digital: on the one hand, it focuses (especially in the first, second, and fifth wave) on an instrumental understanding of digital technologies, referring to the digital as tools and instruments for theological work. On the other hand, the third and fourth wave portray digitization as an object of theology in need of theological reflection; the search for ‘a theological reassessment of digitality and a digital reassessment of theology.’¹⁴ What is missing from these two

¹⁰ Ibid., 39.

¹¹ Ibid., 37-41.

¹² Ibid., 33; compare Clifford Anderson, ‘Digital Humanities and the Future of Theology’, *Cursor_ Zeitschrift Für Explorative Theologie*, 1 (2018), doi: 10.21428/47f01edf.

¹³ Phillips, Schiefelbein-Guerrero and Kurlberg, ‘Defining Digital Theology’, 32-3.

¹⁴ Ibid., 37.

perspectives, and is only hinted at in the third wave, is the question of how digitization changes theology not only in terms of tools and instruments, but leads to constitutive shifts of and new questions for theological work. This shows an interesting parallel to many debates about public theology. For there, too, the question of the public of theology is often perceived not as constitutive for theological thinking but rather as a question of the issue and aim of theology. As an object for reflection, digital public spheres have already been considered very carefully in the context of public theology.¹⁵

Taking up the debates of public theology and digital theology, I will choose a different focus in order to reflect on the relationship between digital space and theology as a challenge to public theology- I will show that these considerations should also be understood as a contribution to the debate about digital theology. Employing the metaphor of digital space enables me both to specify and to systematize the relationship between theology and digitization. Based on and beyond the above-mentioned instrumental and objective understanding of the digital, I will take up two perspectives, considering the implications of the digital space in public theology.

Firstly, thinking about spaces shows that digital space is not only an instrument and issue of theological work, but also determines the place and context of theological thinking itself. In this respect, the processes summarized as digitization are massively changing the spaces of public theology and, in turn, the way of theological thinking: theology is theology in digital spaces. This affects theology in the digital space in a narrow sense, for example through theological online journals, podcasts, YouTube channels, or through efforts to use digital tools such as adapting methods from digital humanities in theology. But, in a broader sense, related to the understanding of the cultural impact of digitization outlined in the second section, it also

¹⁵ See, for example, the excellent volume Jonas Bedford-Strohm, Florian Höhne and Julian Zeyher-Quattlender, eds, *Digitaler Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven auf politische Partizipation im Wandel* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2019).

influences the logics and patterns of the digital-analogue space of today's world. In reflecting on the digital space and the changes of public theology in and through digital spaces, the focus shifts to one's own theology.

Secondly, and derived from the first point, theological thinking not only changes in its way, but also in its figures and models: what I think about theologically cannot be determined independently of the medial conditions and spaces of my own thinking. How do theological categories, models of thought and questions themselves change through processes of digitization? How can I face the task Philips *et al* describe, 'to intentionally explore the impact of digital culture on our theology and our theological concepts and, at the same time, intentionally explore the impact of our theology on our digitality?'¹⁶ For terminological precision and differentiation, I would like to describe this task as a reflection on theologies of the digital.¹⁷

From these two perspectives, I will discuss how public theology changes in and through digital spaces. I then sketch out basic structures and characteristics of digital spaces with special reference to social media: which borders, structures, and agents regulate access to digital spaces? After briefly summarizing different perspectives on that question, I want to make four cases for public theology *in* digital-analogue hybrid cultures in the third part. The fourth part outlines actual challenges that arise when reflecting on theologies of the digital at the intersection of digital theology and public theology. I will close my article with pointing to two major issues for public theology in and for digital spaces.

2. Digital Public Spaces. Agents, Structures, and Borders Governing Digital Spaces

¹⁶ Phillips, Schiefelbein-Guerrero and Kurlberg, 'Defining Digital Theology', p. 39.

¹⁷ I developed this term together with Hanna Reichel in preparation for a workshop with the very same title in 2019. It describes the attempt to think about theological *topoi* and models under the conditions of digital change. In the course of the workshop, this procedure was tested on four *topoi* (see for the results <https://cursor.pubpub.org/issue3-theologiesofthedigital> and <https://cursor.pubpub.org/totd2-explorer>).

2.1.1. Technical Governance: Algorithms

Communication and interaction in digital spaces are essentially structured and guided by algorithms. Much has been written about the algorithmic architecture of digital spaces. I will limit myself to three short remarks. First, algorithms are gatekeepers of digital publics: They not only structure the information that is seen; they also provide the corridors in which the individual can see and communicate. Algorithms thus create ‘corridors of attention’ and structure social practices.¹⁸ Secondly, these corridors of attention lead to a continuing pluralization and segmentation of publics. These processes have been widely discussed in relation to Eli Pariser’s description of ‘filter bubbles’.¹⁹ The personalization of information and interaction breaks up social relationships as much as it enables new encounters. At the same time, it can create new forms of enclosures for the user, limiting what one can perceive in and as the digital world.²⁰ Thirdly, by talking about publics in this context, the algorithmic structure enables personal and fluid publics—they are changing constantly and are never the same today and tomorrow. The publics being talked about are best described as communication networks, which are always new and changing. Accordingly, algorithms are significantly involved in the perception and construction of reality of digital spaces. This has two consequences.

¹⁸ Frederike van Oorschot and Thomas Renkert, ‘Digitale theologische Öffentlichkeiten: Perspektiven aus Theorie und Praxis’, *Cursor_ Zeitschrift Für Explorative Theologie*, 1 (2018), doi: 10.21428/3249ee62. See also Merle, *Religion*, p. 108.

¹⁹ See, for Pariser and the following debate, Frederike van Oorschot, ‘Facebook ist das Opium des Volkes: Politische Meinungsbildung in sozialen Netzwerken als Herausforderung theologischer Ethik’, in Thomas Wabel, Torben Stamer und Jonathan Weider, eds, *Zwischen Diskurs und Affekt: Vergemeinschaftung und Urteilsbildung in der Perspektive Öffentlicher Theologie*, (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2018), pp. 149-66.

²⁰ Robert Seyfert und Jonathan Roberge, ‘What are Algorithmic Cultures’, in Robert Seyfert and Jonathan Roberge, eds, *Algorithmic Cultures: Essays on Meaning, Performance and New Technologies* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), pp. 1-25 at p. 14.

On the one hand, one can observe an interweaving between users and the algorithmic structure of digital spaces. Algorithm-based processes should not be understood as a one-sidedly absolute (for example, as a simple cause-and-effect model).²¹ Algorithms are, at least in part, the product of human programming. But they are also variable and learning structures that can ‘act’ incorrectly.²² Roberge and Seyfarth, therefore, advocate cultivating ‘algorithmic ambiguity’, which emphasizes the interplay between algorithm-based processes, human actions, and (new) cultural characteristics.²³ They conclude: ‘As users, when we operate in algorithmic cultures, we operate algorithms’ which serve as ‘realizations of social relations between various actors and actants.’²⁴ The antagonism between human and algorithmic routines is therefore questionable because it ‘ignores human immersion in algorithms’.²⁵

On the other hand, algorithms are guiding (and limiting) not only for what users of digital media know—both about theology and about what the user perceive as public—but also for the ways of knowledge: As carriers and interpreters of information, digital technologies change the way the users know and think about what they perceive. Here lies their hermeneutical relevance and the need for digital hermeneutics in the culture of digitality, as Rafael Capurro emphasizes.²⁶ Kristin Merle aptly states: ‘[T]he “world” the algorithm presents . . . is not a representation of real settings, but rather a (individualized, usage data-responsive) construction based on specific parameters (whose nature and interaction are generally withdrawn from users).’²⁷

²¹ Tarleton Gillespie, ‘#trendingistrending: When Algorithms Become Culture’, in Seyferth and Roberge, eds, *Algorithmic Cultures*, pp. 52-75.

²² Roberge and Seyfarth, ‘Algorithmic Cultures’.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

²⁶ For more detail, see Frederike van Oorschot, ‘Neue Technik – neue Wissenschaft? Wissenschaftstheoretische und -ethische Herausforderungen der Digital Humanities’, in Frederike van Oorschot and Benjamin Held, eds, *Digitalisierung: Neue Technik, neue Ethik? Interdisziplinäre Auseinandersetzung mit den Folgen der digitalen Transformation*. (Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Press 2021), pp. 143-64, doi: 10.11588/heibooks.945.c12680.

²⁷ Merle, *Religion*, p. 159 (my translation).

2.2. Economic Governance: Attention and Power

Of course, the algorithmic structure is neither a coincidence nor an end in itself. Rather, it is an expression of the digital power structure, as the Austrian media and culture theorist Ramón Reichert points out: the users, acting autonomously on the surface, are controlled heteronomously by the algorithmic structure of the user interfaces. The hierarchical order thus takes place between back-end and front-end.²⁸

Digital power structures have to be distinguished carefully depending on the space one is referring to. There is a lot of ongoing research on social networks and search engines, for instance. The former Harvard economist Shoshana Zuboff shows in impressive detail—mostly with reference to Facebook and Google—that the underlying structure is not just about direct profit, but about the capitalization of user attention and about data, aiming to describe user profiles and micro-milieus as accurate as possible in order to sell or use them to influence economic, political, and social behaviour.²⁹ Social media companies are profit-oriented, and their primary economic interests do not correspond to user interests in most cases. The engine of these production cycles is the monetization of the resource attention, individually and collectively. The goal is to get as many clicks as possible, producing economic value. The structures aim at quick and impulsive reactions from users.³⁰ As Jenny Wright points out, the necessity of authentic speech – and namely the questions ‘how do we speak’ and ‘where do we

²⁸ Ramón Reichert, *Die Macht der Vielen: Über den neuen Kult der digitalen Vernetzung* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2013), pp. 20-1. See also Gary S. Schaal, ‘Hybrid influencing und die Vulnerabilität digital eingebetteter demokratischer Öffentlichkeiten’, in Bedford-Strohm, Höhne and Zeyher-Quattlander, eds, *Digitaler Strukturwandel*, pp. 121–34.

²⁹ Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2019).

³⁰ See Daniel Kahnemann, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011); Konrad Lischka und Christian Stöcker, *Digitale Öffentlichkeit. Wie algorithmische Prozesse den gesellschaftlichen Diskurs beeinflussen. Arbeitspapier im Auftrag der Bertelsmannstiftung* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 2017), p. 31; Caja Thimm, ‘Digitale Öffentlichkeit und Demokratie’, in tv diskurs 80 2:21 (2017), 44-7 at 45.

say it' – are central in digital publics.³¹ Clive Pearson's reflection of the 2013 election in Australia highlights this aspect from a specific case study.³²

These are mainly induced through emotional and short contributions, preferably pictures.³³ Rational discourse, careful consideration, or extensive argumentation achieve little profit and disappear quickly from the digital surface. Due to this algorithmically controlled prioritization, the most influential actors are those who share many articles but are highly unlikely to have read them, leading to a significant divergence of 'content quality and algorithmic relevance'.³⁴

In spaces other than those of social media, we can see a different, almost contrary picture. Scientific non-profit platforms, for instance, show, firstly, how scientific communities became more permeable. At the same time, they compete with others for the attention of digital users.³⁵ Benedikt Friedrich, Hanna Reichel, and Thomas Renkert thus state: 'Platforms and networks fulfill more and more functions, which previously belonged to institutions, certificates and authorship.'³⁶ Secondly, the importance of single or smaller groups for the aggregation of knowledge increases.³⁷ Consequently, the digital forms of aggregating knowledge lead to a discussion about the subjectivist paradigm of epistemic individualism in favor for 'epistemic communities . . . as primary carriers of knowledge and insight.'³⁸ These processes are accompanied by an increase of barriers and discursive closings of scientific resources and

³¹ Jenny Anne Wright, 'With Whose Voice and What Language? Public Theology in a Mediated Public', *International Journal of Public Theology*, 9:2, (2015), 156-75 at p. 163-68. See also Elaine Graham, 'Editorial', *International Journal of Public Theology*, 9:2, (2015), 125-30 at 126.

³² See – with many references to the field of social media studies – Clive Pearson, 'Twittering the Gospel', *International Journal of Public Theology*, 9:2, (2015), 176-192 especially. at pp. 185-91.

³³ See Stefan Stieglitz and Linh Dang-Xuan, 'Impact and Diffusion of Sentiment in Public Communication on Facebook', *ECIS 2012 Proceedings*, 98, <<http://aisel.aisnet.org/ecis2012/98>> [accessed 22 August 2019]. See also the overview in Lischka and Stöcker, *Digitale Öffentlichkeit*, pp. 29-31.

³⁴ See *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³⁵ Benedikt Friedrich, Hanna Reichel and Thomas Renkert, 'Citizen Theology. Eine Exploration zwischen Digitalisierung und theologischer Epistemologie', in Bedford-Strohm, Höhne and Zeyher-Quattlander, eds, *Digitaler Strukturwandel*, pp. 175-191 at p. 176.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 177 (my translation).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 178 (my translation).

³⁸ *Ibid.* (my translation).

processes, which run counter to the theoretically possible opening of open access or open science, and heighten the threshold between science and the public.³⁹

2.3. Social Governance: Participation, Identity, and Content

This last aspect refers to a third level of governance: Many digital spaces are focused on participation and interaction. Providers and users of content are often inseparable. Users write and read at the same time, they share and simultaneously moderate. The Australian media scholar Axel Bruns therefore coined the neologism ‘producer’.⁴⁰ This structure creates fluid participatory discourses. As a result, public communication is changing ‘from a socially selective, linear and one-sided to a participatory, network-like and interactive communication’, as Christian Neuberger describes.⁴¹

Additionally, in social networks (and partly in other platforms such as blogs) one sees a peculiar connection between content and identity: “I am what I like”—the digital self is constituted by its visualized interconnections.⁴² Interactions are highly influenced by private content, while also part of a public debate. For this reason, Merle proposes to conceptualize an ‘intermediary and integrated network public with a dynamic character. This means that the public ‘is not a pre-existing entity but rather a product of social circulation through various forms of media.’⁴³

³⁹ Ibid., p. 177.

⁴⁰ Alexander Filipović, ‘Die Enge der weiten Medienwelt. Bedrohen Algorithmen die Freiheit öffentlicher Kommunikation?’, *Communicatio Socialis*, 46:2 (2013), 192-208 at 194, doi: 10.5771/0010-3497-2013-2-192.

⁴¹ Christoph Neuberger, ‘Internet, Journalismus und Öffentlichkeit: Analyse des Medienumbuchs’, in Christoph Neuberger, Christian Nuernberger and Melanie Rischke, eds, *Journalismus im Internet: Professionen – Partizipation – Technisierung*, (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2009), pp. 19-105 at p. 39 (my translation).

⁴² Compare Christoph Neuberger, ‘Soziale Netzwerke im Internet: Kommunikationswissenschaftliche Einordnung und Forschungsüberblick’, in Christoph Neuberger and Volker Gehrau, eds, *StudiVZ. Diffusion, Nutzung und Wirkung eines sozialen Netzwerks im Internet*, (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2011), pp. 33–96.

⁴³ Merle, *Religion*, p. 421. Merle cites the definitions of Lövheim and Axner, see Mia Lövheim and Marta Axner, ‘Mediatized Religion and Public Spheres. Current Approaches and New Questions’, in Kenneth Granholm, Marucs Moberg and Sofia Sjö, eds, *Religion, Media, and Social Change* (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 38-53 at p. 44.

2.4. Hybrid Spaces in a Digital Culture

These structures of digital spaces raise many questions—ethical, hermeneutical, social, political, and psychological ones. A very obvious reaction, and one clearly observable in the debate about the use and necessity of digital theology, is to avoid digital spaces altogether. But taking a closer look at concepts of digitization shows that this avoidance is impossible, not only for reasons of reach (even if hardly any theology that describes itself as public theology will and can separate itself from digital public spheres). The refusal to participate in the digital space also fundamentally misjudges the scope of the digital change itself.

Digital spaces, in the narrower sense of the word, can be described as technically structured spaces of information, communication, and interaction, such as social networks, search engines, databases, or other digitally coded and online-based tools. The adjective digital describes the type of this technical structure and its mediality.

These virtual spaces partly exist separately and partly interfere with analog spaces. Users of digital media technologies live in an analog-digital hybrid space,⁴⁴ not only in technical terms but also in a cultural sense: As concepts of the digital have penetrated into other areas, Flexi Stalder observes a ‘hybridization and consolidation of the digital’, described as a ‘culture of digitality’ characterized by referentiality, community, and algorithmicity.⁴⁵

This cultural-scientific concept of digitization underlies the debates about digital theology outlined above: digital media change is interpreted as a cultural change.⁴⁶ In this

⁴⁴ See van Oorschot and Renkert, ‘Öffentlichkeiten’; Merle, *Religion*, p. 103.

⁴⁵ Felix Stalder, *Kultur der Digitalität*, (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2016), p. 20.

⁴⁶ For the German discourse, see Alexander Filipović, ‘Die Datafizierung der Welt. Eine ethische Vermessung des digitalen Wandels’, *Communicatio Socialis*, 48:1 (2015), pp. 6-15, doi: 10.5771/0010-3497-2015-1-6; Horst Gorski, ‘Theologie in der digitalen Welt. Ein Versuch’, *Pastoraltheologie* 107 (2018), pp. 187-211 at p. 198; Merle, *Religion*; Günter Thomas, ‘Wie wirkt das mediale Umfeld auf die Inhalte religiöser Kommunikation und ihre Reflexion in protestantischer “Dogmatik” und “Ethik”?’ in Rudolf Englert, ed., *Gott googeln? Multimedia und Religion*, (Neukirchen: Neukirchner, 2012), pp. 70-81. See also Heidi A. Campbell and Stephen Garner, *Networked Theology. Negotiating Faith in Digital Culture*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), p. 64; Anita L. Cloete, ‘Living in a Digital Culture: The Need for Theological Reflection’, *HTS Theologese Studies / Theological Studies*, 71:2 (2015), pp. 1-7 at p. 3, doi:10.4102/hts.v71i2.2073.

respect, it is necessary to think about the changes in public theology in and for digital spaces, even if one's theological thinking is not (or only partially) located in digital spaces in the narrower sense. Therefore, I will now sketch a frame for a public theology in a digital culture—related to the way of theological thinking and judging (part three) as well as the issues for theologies of the digital (part four).

3. Public Theology in a Digital Culture

3.1. Digital spaces create plural and fluid publics. They thus expand the concept of “publicness” – and at the same time lead it ad absurdum.

The different forms of governance touch upon a central concept of public theology—that is, the understanding of what is meant by public. The fact that digitization brings with it massive changes in the concept of public is hardly surprising. It can be reasonably claimed that digital spaces create plural and fluid publics. They expand the concept of ‘publicness – and at the same time reduce it to absurdity.

The fact that public theology has to address not one but many publics has long been recognized by its representatives. In digital spaces, the new question of how to deal with seemingly infinite public spaces arises. Therefore, public theologians need not only ask how this plurality can be described and addressed, but also if these fluid personal spaces of interactions are aptly described as publics, for example, as ‘personal publics’ as Merle suggests.⁴⁷ What would be ‘non-public’ in this view? What does public theology mean if the public are formed as a communication network, constantly being created and changed in the course of the digital interaction?

⁴⁷ Merle, *Religion*, pp. 103, 112-113. (my translation).

3.2. Theology and the public are not opposed to one another; on the contrary, public theologies are constituted in and by publics. Public theology is therefore to be reformulated as a mode of discourse.

One consequence seems obvious: If public communication is changing from socially selective, linear, and one-sided communication to participatory, net-like, and interactive communication, the demarcation of theology and its publics is unsustainable. Theology and the public are not opposed to each other; on the contrary, public theologies are constituted in and by publics. Public theology should be reformulated as a mode of discourse.⁴⁸

Following this, publics are by no means a subordinate counterpart of theology: public theology cannot be developed independently or outside of its publics and then be carried to a public. Rather, the public—more aptly, the publicness of theology—is constituted in the process of theological thinking, discussion, and action itself. As John de Gruchy describes it, ‘[b]y its very nature, Christian witness is public not private, but public theology is not simply about the church making public statements or engaging in social action; it is rather a mode of doing theology that is intended to address matters of public importance.’⁴⁹ Public theology is thus a dynamic process of theologies becoming public in discourse. Public and theological,” understood in this sense, are adjectives—or, more aptly, adverbs—of a cooperative and participatory process rather than static poles of assumed recipients.

⁴⁸ See for the following – with special reference to biblical hermeneutics – Frederike van Oorschot: ‘Iudex, norma et regula? Zur Schrifthermeneutik öffentlicher Theologie’, *Ethik und Gesellschaft*, 1 (2019), doi: 10.18156/eug-1-2019-art-2.

⁴⁹ John De Gruchy, ‘Public Theology as Christian Witness. Exploring the Genre’, *International Journal of Public Theology*, 1:1 (2007), pp. 26-41 at 40, doi: 10.1163/156973207X194466.

The churches become involved in public theological discourse not primarily as actors in civil society or as mediators of public theology but as a place of public theology, offering spaces for common public discourse.⁵⁰

3.3. Theological discourse in the digital space is testimonial discourse, closely relating content and identity for theological reasons.

The close connection between content and identity is surprisingly similar to the Christian concept of witness and testimony: Spreading the message of the gospel, the content cannot be separated from the identity of the proclaimer.⁵¹ Theological discourse is, in effect, testimonial discourse, closely relating content and identity for theological reasons.

The language of testimony and witness enables a differentiated relation between individual, community, and that to which they witness: Public theology is personal and/or communal witness, which at the same time refers to other testimonies—synchronous and diachronic. Every witness is part of a community of witnesses, as we can even see in the ‘witnessing community’ of biblical texts in the canon.⁵² The testimony, however, is fundamentally different from that which it testifies. Understanding public theology as a theology of witness has two major consequences.

First, each testimony is a contested testimony.⁵³ The plurality of Christian testimonies, starting with the plurality of biblical testimonies in the canon, can be integrated into a witnessing community without flattening or reducing their strangeness and diversity from the outset. Similarly, de Gruchy describes the controversy of public theology both in terms of

⁵⁰ See Frederike van Oorschot, ‘Making Public Theology Operational. Public Theology and the Church’, *International Journal of Public Theology*, 13:2 (2019), pp. 203-26, doi: 10.1163/15697320-12341572.

⁵¹ De Gruchy also uses the concept of witness in his description of public theology, but with different notions. See De Gruchy, ‘Public Theology’, pp. 40-1.

⁵² For details see van Oorschot, ‘Iudex’.

⁵³ De Gruchy, ‘Public Theology’, pp. 40-1.

perception and description of social phenomena and in the struggle for a theological reflection on them. If it does not want to miss its cause, public theology must be self-critical and sensitive to other perspectives and approaches.⁵⁴

The testimonial character of public theology can be related dogmatically to the theology of the cross, as Rudolf von Sinner argues: Referring to the kenosis of Christ, public theology is ‘for theological reasons, kenotic, self-restraining, and self-critical’.⁵⁵ In their reflections on a citizen theology, Benedikt Friedrich, Hanna Reichel, and Thomas Renkert determine the testimony more specifically as a fundamental epistemic category of theology. , as I will show in the case study in the next chapter. The second consequence is elaborated in the next statement:

3.4. Insofar as the Christian witness is constituted collectively, public theology can be understood as a collaborative practice.

The participatory and net-like structure of most digital communication spaces makes it inevitable to practice a participatory and interactive public theology in digital spaces.⁵⁶ Similarly, Christian witness is always part of the communion of Christian witnesses in time and space. Christian witness and its theological reflection can therefore be described as a ‘participatory and collaborative production of the whole body’⁵⁷ or as ‘networked theology’.⁵⁸ The subjects of such a theology are then not a few experts, but all Christians in decentralized networks.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 41.

⁵⁵ Von Sinner, Rudolf: *Öffentliche Theologie. Neue Ansätze in globaler Perspektive*. EvTh 5.71 (2011). pp. 324–40 at 340.

⁵⁶ See, for a more detailed theological analysis, Merle, *Religion*, p. 422; and Iona Nord, ‘Eine langfristige Gestaltungsaufgabe. Digitalisierung und politische Partizipation als Herausforderung für Kirche und Praktische Theologie’, in Bedford-Strohm, Höhne and Zeyher-Quattlender, eds, *Digitaler Strukturwandel*, pp. 63-82.

⁵⁷ Friedrich, Reichel and Renkert, ‘Citizen Theology’, p. 183.

⁵⁸ Campbell and Garner, *Networked Theology*.

⁵⁹ Merle, *Religion*, p. 431.

As the individual and the community are interrelated in the ‘context of plural analog and digital publics’, theological debates become ‘more transparent and comprehensible even for broader publics across the boundaries of the witness community.’⁶⁰ This also blurs the lines between theology in the churches and in the academy.

This reformulation of public theology also changes its task: It is less about informing “the” public than about looking for discursive potentials for osmosis with and between different publics.⁶¹ According to Merle, the aim of public theology is to ‘serve people to develop their own ethical and religious judgment’, thereby having an educational task instead of being obligated to unambiguous statements.⁶² One issue might be the ability to reflect on the digital space for information management and joint gate-watching as a social practice.⁶³

3.5. Instead of a conclusion: A case study in citizen theology – “Cursor_ Journal for exploratory theology”

Together with some colleagues, I try to give shape to this form of public theology in a theological open access journal called “Cursor_ Journal for exploratory theology” (<https://cursor.pubpub.org/>). Based on the observation that theological debates in church, academy, and online are often hardly connected, Cursor_ aims at an explorative, networked way of theological thinking in an open access journal on theological issues. To this end, the editors work on combining classic and innovative text and publication formats (theology in simple language, essayistic texts, recursive, *extra nos*), while the platform used, PubPub, offers

⁶⁰ Friedrich, Reichel and Renkert, ‘Citizen Theology’, p. 186.

⁶¹ For the concept of osmosis as task for public theology facing different and diverging publics, see Frederike van Oorschot, ‘Fragmentierte Öffentlichkeiten und geteilte Realität. Zum osmotischen Potential theologischer Modellierung von differenzierten Kommunikationsräumen’, in Bedford-Strohm, Höhne and Zeyher-Quattlander, eds, *Digitaler Strukturwandel*, pp. 83-94.

⁶² Merle, *Religion*, p. 433.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 107, 118.

many opportunities to comment and discuss as well as relate and combine debates to social networks and other digital forums.

My coeditors Benedikt Friedrich, Hanna Reichel, and Thomas Renkert describe our aim as a model of citizen theology—a theological reinterpretation of citizen science based on the understanding of Christian witness. Citizen theology is a ‘model of theology, which establishes a connection between the object of knowledge and its path, as well as the actors of theology and their attitudes. The media transformations of the digital age offer paths to develop a more collaborative, participatory and exploratory practice of science.’⁶⁴

Testimony serves as a basic epistemic category: ‘The community of faith is constituted by witnessing, which, by human standards, can neither be guaranteed authoritatively nor institutionally. The reassessment of all values through Paul’s theology of the cross (1 Cor 1,18-29) also epistemically recognizes the weakest as being particularly privileged by God (1 Cor 12:24).’⁶⁵ The authors conclude: ‘Citizen theology is therefore less a program that prescribes certain methods and contents, but rather a new style of research and an epistemic attitude that can only act experimentally, exploratively and self-reflectively as a counterweight to existing scientific distortions.’⁶⁶

Projects like this are possible forms of public theology in digital spaces. Thinking about other forms and bringing them into dialogue with existing forms of public theology, is a constant task of the discourse.

4. Concluding and Opening Remarks

The sketch of digital theology outlined above makes obvious that changing the spaces of theology leads to changing the issues and topics of theology. Following the concept of

⁶⁴ Friedrich, Reichel and Renkert, ‘Citizen Theology’, p. 187 (my translation).

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 178 (my translation).

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 187 (my translation).

digitization as cultural change, this is not limited to theological debates explicitly located within the digital. Rather, today's digital-analog hybrid spaces lead to massive shifts in theological terms and concepts. The medial and cultural shift called digitalization furnishes an invitation to evolve a theology in and for digital culture. The need for theological reflection is called for very widely in the debates on digital theology, and it is also the task of public theology in and for digital spaces to address these questions. The following now outlines some of the pressing questions that will require further work.

Does the doctrine of God change, especially the understanding of omnipotence and providence, as Thomas and Reichel suspect? To what extent do models of connectivity enable reformulations of the doctrine of the Trinity and change our understanding of faith and salvation, as Gorski suggests? Is the soteriological model of legal thinking questioned by the increasing 'emotional communication' as Thomas outlines?⁶⁷

The fact that digital and hence cultural change go hand in hand with fundamental changes of anthropological conditions is sociological and philosophical consensus. There is also a growing awareness in theology that the experience of space, time, and objective reality is primarily mediated and therefore changed by differing medial conditions. Digital mediality and life in digital-analog hybrid spaces determine both self-awareness and the sociality of human life. So far, there have been approaches to dealing with these questions in the field of practical theology and educational theory.⁶⁸ In systematic theology, the concepts of personality

⁶⁷ Gorski, 'Theologie', p. 76; Hanna Reichel, 'Worldmaking Knowledge: What the Doctrine of Omniscience Can Help Us Understand about Digitization', *Cursor Zeitschrift Für Explorative Theologie*, 3 (2019), <https://cursor.pubpub.org/pub/reichel-omniscience-i> and <https://cursor.pubpub.org/pub/reichel-omniscience-ii> [accessed september 9, 2021]; Thomas, 'Umfeld', p. 76.

⁶⁸ Christina Costanza, Christoph Dahling-Sander, Vera Dreyer, Christina Ernst, Alexander Filipović, Christoph Gieseler und Karsten Kopjar, eds, *Personen im Web 2.0. Kommunikationswissenschaftliche, ethische und anthropologische Zugänge zu einer Theologie der Social Media*, (Göttingen: Edition Ruprecht, 2012); Christina Ernst, *Mein Gesicht zeigt ich nicht auf Facebook. Social Media als Herausforderung theologischer Anthropologie* (Göttingen: Edition Ruprecht, 2015); Tanja Gojny, Kathrin S. Kürzinger und Susanne Schwarz, eds, *Selfie – I like it. Anthropologische und ethische Implikationen digitaler Selbstinszenierung* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2016).

and embodiment are of primary interest, but also basic categories such as rationality, emotionality, and the media experience of space and time come into focus.⁶⁹

Institution, company, body of Christ, association, network, community of saints—the ideas of what church is and what it could be have always been diverse, contradictory, and controversial.⁷⁰ Facing the massive growing forms of Christian online activities and networks, many questions have to be discussed: Where, who, or what is the church? Where and how is the place for preaching and sacraments? How do the different forms of offline and online church relate to each other? What does priesthood of all believers mean? How much professionalism, order, and hierarchy are necessary? On these questions of ecclesiology, there is currently a hiatus between the broad and differentiated debates in the English-speaking context and those in the German one, the latter being more interested in empirical research and church theory.⁷¹ Church theory, especially, is experiencing a considerable growth of interest due to the current pandemic change, leading to an increased need for reflection,

Several challenging questions pervade the mentioned theological fields—for example, which underlying concept of reality and truth is assumed.⁷² The concept of freedom also comes

⁶⁹ Florian Höhne, 'The Porous Mask. A Theological Reflection on Concepts of Personhood and Personal Agency in the Digital Age', *Cursor_ Zeitschrift Für Explorative Theologie*, 3 (2019), <<https://cursor.pubpub.org/pub/uv2c6nd4>> [accessed September 9, 2021]; Anne-Kathrin Lück, Johannes Brosseder; Johannes Fischer und Joachim Track, *Der gläserne Mensch im Internet. Ethische Reflexionen zur Sichtbarkeit, Leiblichkeit und Personalität in der Online-Kommunikation*, (Stuttgart, Kohlhammer: 2013); Gorski, 'Theologie', p. 188; Thomas, 'Umfeld', pp. 73, 74, 77.

⁷⁰For more detail see Frederike van Oorschot (2021), 'Network Sanctorum: Reflections on an Image of Church Online', *Cursor_ Zeitschrift Für Explorative Theologie*, <https://cursor.pubpub.org/pub/oorschot-network-sanctorum/release/1> (accessed September 9, 2021). See also Esther McIntosh, 'Belonging Without Believing. Church as Community in an Age of Digital Media', *International Journal of Public Theology*, 9:2 (2015), 131-55 at pp. 144-8.

⁷¹ See, for example, Alexander Deeg and Christian Lehnert, *Liturgie – Körper – Medien. Herausforderungen für den Gottesdienst in der digitalen Gesellschaft*, (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2019); Anna-Katharina Lienau, *Gebete im Internet. Eine praktisch-theologische Untersuchung*, (Erlangen: CPV, 2009); Merle: *Religion*; Roland Rosenstock and Ines Sura, eds, *Mediatisierung und religiöse Kommunikation. Herausforderungen für Religion und Kirche*, (Freiburg: Kreuz, 2018).

⁷² Ee Clifford Anderson, 'A New Hermeneutics of Suspicion? The Challenge of Deepfakes to Theological Epistemology', *Cursor_ Zeitschrift Für Explorative Theologie*, 3 (2019), <<https://cursor.pubpub.org/pub/andersondeepfakes>> [accessed September 9, 2021]; Cloete, 'Living', p. 1; Gorski, 'Theologie', p. 208-209. Elke Hemminger, 'Unendlich viel seltsamer: Digitale Lebenswelten und die Frage nach der Wirklichkeit', in Ulrich Beuttler, Markus Mühlhling and Martin Rothgangel, eds, *Digitalisierung und Freiheit*.

into view.⁷³ Surprisingly rarely is the topic of power taken into consideration, related to concepts of representation, trust and truth⁷⁴. The power structures of digital spaces as publics for theology have to be considered carefully. The same questions as in analogue publics have to be addressed. And, especially regarding some forms of social media, to what extent are we as users of digital media technologies, as theologians and churches, willing to fulfill the needs of these platforms in order to gain attention for our message, thereby empowering them with new data? In words of Esther Macintosh: How to relate ‘communion’ and ‘mediation’?⁷⁵

Sometimes the implications for the concept of theology itself must be taken into account.⁷⁶ On the one hand, the debates about the hermeneutical and scientific-theoretical implications of digital research methods discuss the implications of digital tools to our understanding of knowledge, epistemological logics, and questions of competence in the humanities in general and in theology in particular. On the other hand, as different theological disciplines meet in the field of digital theology the question of how a theological understanding of digitalization can be approached hermeneutically and methodically is quite controversial.

A last task for public theology is what I call the eschatological horizon of digital spaces.⁷⁷ As digital technologies are not perceivable sensually, they depend, even more than other technical changes, on implicit imaginations, metaphors, and narratives. In the field of artificial intelligence, for example, the terms of intelligence, learning, and autonomy is used to

Mediale Lebenswelten und reformatorische Erkenntnis im Diskurs, (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2018), pp. 69-88; Karsten Kopjar, *Kommunikation des Evangeliums für die Web-2.0-Generation. Virtuelle Realität als reale Virtualität* (Münster: LIT, 2013); Thomas Schlag, ‘Truth Communication in Times of Digital Abundance: A Practical Theological Perspective’, *Open Theology*, 5:1 (2019), pp. 420-429, doi: 10.1515/opth-2019-0033.

⁷³ Beuttler, Mühlhng and Rothgangel, eds, *Digitalisierung und Freiheit*; Gorski, ‘Theologie’, pp. 203-204; Benedikt Friedrich, ‘Exploring Freedom. A Conversation between FLOSS-Culture and Theological Practices of Freedom’, *Cursor_ Zeitschrift Für Explorative Theologie*, 3 (2019), doi:10.21428/fb61f6aa.9cf71305.

⁷⁴ See Wright, ‘Voice’.

⁷⁵ McIntosh, ‘Belonging’, 136.

⁷⁶ For more detail, see van Oorschot, ‘Hermeneutik des Digitalen’.

⁷⁷ See Florian Höhne, ‘Darf ich vorstellen: Digitalisierung. Anmerkungen zu Narrativen und Imaginationen digitaler Kulturpraktiken in theologisch-ethischer Perspektive’, in Bedford-Strohm, Höhne and Zeyher-Quattlender, eds, *Digitaler Strukturwandel*, pp. 25-46; Torsten Meireis “‘O daß ich tausend Zungen hätte.’ Chancen und Gefahren der digitalen Transformation politischer Öffentlichkeit – die Perspektive evangelischer Theologie’, in Bedford-Strohm, Höhne and Zeyher-Quattlender, eds, *Digitaler Strukturwandel*, pp. 47-62.

describe machines. Why are these anthropological categories widely used even in ethical reflection and what is implied by using them? Following the long tradition of imaginations and stories in the Christian tradition, theology and the church have a sensorium for such narratives and imaginations. To reflect on these narratives means to unveil the eschatological horizon of digital changes: Where do data-generating companies promise a godlike providence, caring for humankind in all of our ways? Where do promises of salvation appear in the debate about artificial intelligence? Analyzing and reflecting these imaginations is an important task for public theology, trying to understand the cultural impact of digitalization.

Thinking theologically about digitalization nearly covers all areas of dogmatic thinking. Public theology, in this sense, not only reflects on digital spaces as the context of theology, but also shapes them theologically.⁷⁸ At the same time, digital spaces encourage us to think about the way theology is done publicly: As a collaborative practice situated in the controversial debate of Christian witnesses, public theology not only reacts to changes in digital spaces, but takes up theological modes of discourse, which can be newly explored in the digital-analogue spaces of today.

⁷⁸ This transformation differs from Wright's concept of sacramental worldview: The concept of sacramentality implies God as an actor or transformer: my argument points to the narrative and imaginative dimension of worldviews, constructed by humans. See Wright, 'Voice', 173-5.