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From Archangels to Virtual Pilgrims: A Brief History of Papal Digital Mobilization as Soft Power

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Abstract: The perpetual public display of successful mass mobilization and pilgrimage has become a pillar of papal soft power. During the 20th century, the papacy had repeatedly demonstrated its ability to use new technologies for public communication, media content production and mass mobilization. John Paul II endorsed the establishment of the first Vatican website and an official papal e-mail account, which provided Catholics a new form of communication with the Holy Father. During the pontificate of Benedict XVI, the papacy created several Twitter accounts, which would become the backbone of papal digital mobilization. Francis built on the success of his predecessors as he initiated the modernization of the Holy See's media department. However, with the growth of the Internet and the stress test of the COVID-19 pandemic, the mechanics of mobilization, pilgrimage and power have considerably changed. With the religious role of the popes taken as a given, the paper looks into the history of papal mobilization, the role of the Internet and why it is not used to its full potential yet.

Keywords: mobilization; pilgrimage; internet; John Paul II; Benedict XVI; Francis; soft power

1. Introduction: Papal Mobilization and Soft Power

While the papacy has had a wide set of mobilization tools at its disposal, such as the voluntary infantry regiment of the papal Zouaves in the 19th century, or financial donations such as St. Peter's Pence, the media has always played an important role for papal mobilization. Until recently, the public power of the modern papacy rested largely on its ability to physically mobilize the masses through public appearances of the pope (Barbato and Heid 2020; Barbato et al. 2018; Klimczak and Petersen 2017). While St. Peter's Square in Rome remains a central stage of mass mobilization, apostolic journeys abroad have become a reliable tool with which to mobilize Christians around the world during papal visits to local sites of worship and historical relevance. In addition, the modern papacy introduced recurring events, such as World Youth Days, to visibly demonstrate its vitality and legitimacy in the public space. Mobilization became a strategy of public papal communication (Löffler 2018, forthcoming). However, with the ongoing decline of Catholicism in Europe, the transition towards a digital communication culture and the current situation of a global pandemic, including substantial limitations to social contacts and gatherings, the modern papacy has, at least temporarily, lost its ability to physically mobilize the masses. In this sense, the papacy is in dire need of a new strategy.

A quick survey of the history of the modern papacy indicates that paradigm shifts of mobilization frequently occurred in times of crisis. During the 19th and 20th centuries, the papacy continuously adapted new technologies to its strategy of public mobilization. For instance, before the unification of Italy and the dissolution of the Papal States, Pius IX (1846–1878) initiated the construction of several railroads that connected the Italian states with the territories of the Papal States in order to increase the number of pilgrims (Nersinger 2020). Pius XI (1922–1939) introduced the Vatican Radio, which became an important asset of transnational papal communication during the Second World War (Pollard 2010; Samerski

2020; Valente 2020) as well as the Cold War (Bösch 2020; Hänni 2020). Since Paul VI (1963–1978), and especially since the papacy of John Paul II (1978–2005), papal air travel and official visits abroad have become an integral part of the pontifical mobilization toolkit (Barbato 2020a). With the rise of new technologies and their successful integration into the strategies of public performance, mass mobilization has started to transform into a digital phenomenon of papal power.

This article focuses on the current state of digital papal mobilization and its potential as a source of power. Its quantitative–qualitative analysis evaluates the range and content of digital papal communication channels such as the pontiff's Twitter and Instagram accounts, the Holy See's YouTube channels and other forms of electronic communication, such as electronic prayers (e-prayers) and virtual pilgrimages. In order to understand the current shift towards a digital papacy, I draw a brief genealogy of mobilization, from the first Vatican web presence in 1995 to the state of the digital papacy during the 2020–2021 COVID-19 pandemic.

What is mass mobilization? As the paper focuses on the current state of papal digital mobilization, the term mass mobilization refers to different overlapping aspects of power: from a political science perspective, it is used to describe the process of gathering a crowd at one place as well as acts of participation and interaction. Finally, mobilization also includes forms of orchestration, such as the usage of media in order to publicly display the masses. In summary, the success of mobilization depends not only on the number of people, but on their transformation into one group that is part of the event. Contemporary research hints at the importance of papal mass mobilization in the form of trans-local, large-scale events as a public display of papal power between the late 19th and early 21st centuries (Heid 2020; Matena 2018; Samerski 2020; Valente 2020). This suggests that the success of papal mobilization also depends on its ability to adapt to the zeitgeist of communication technology. Its development into the virtual playing fields of digital communication can be understood as the papacy's next step to mobilize the masses as followers, viewers, subscribers and virtual legions.

How does mass mobilization work? The famous frontispiece to Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* may serve as a starting point: in Hobbes' metaphor, the legitimacy of political power is visualized through the body of a ruler made up of his subjects; the pope can be understood as the head of a fluid, composite body made up of everyone that physically gathers around him (Löffler, forthcoming). According to Horst Bredekamp's theory of the picture act (*Bildakt*), where the picture and the observer become public communicators on their own (Bredekamp 1998, 2015a, 2015b; Schmitz 2007), the continuously repeated act of papal mobilization produces a publicly visible community of believers and followers. Within the field of political thought and theory, this public display of the masses can be understood as a strategic tool to represent an otherwise invisible *corpus mysticum* (Kantorowicz 1990, pp. 279–316). The publicly visible mobilization of pilgrims as a celebrating crowd transforms the power of the modern papacy into a latent political entity that can survive the politically unused moment, and its aggregation brings about structural transformations (Barbato 2018, p. 96). The modern papacy uses the mortal head of the pope to represent and legitimize an immortal and unique hybrid body—that is, a political, religious and social entity. The papacy demonstrates its significance through successful mobilization, while in return, the masses legitimize the pope. In addition, the crowd publicly communicates different aspects of papal power: praying and singing become a representation of faith; cheering and waving become a demonstration of personal affection towards the pope; the composition of flags and banners becomes a nonverbal representation of the pope as a transnational actor.

What are the characteristics of the papal crowds? It is a crowd that can gather regularly and in various places, such as St. Peter's Square in Rome or Christian pilgrimage sites; Catholics are visible as residents and pilgrims, as a mixed crowd of locals and travelers. In addition to its own sites, the modern papacy is able to use locations with historical and social significance as stages for mass mobilization. The papal mass is a multitude

oriented towards the pope, who guides it through the event (e.g., Angelus; Apostolic Journeys; World Youth Days) with the help of well-known rites, common chants and personal messages. Thus, the pope becomes a public magnet, a messenger and an event manager. In this regard, he plays the role of a charismatic leader. Based on the type of event, the papal mass mobilizes different parts of society. Catholic youth gather during the World Youth Days, while regional venues of worship and pilgrimage attract both local and international pilgrims. Finally, the papal mobilization is embedded in the public staging of the event itself. To mobilize also means to involve the masses as participants—e.g., the entourage of high-ranking political representatives, heads of state and government gathered during the papal funeral (Schlott 2018, 2013)—through their joint presence and their visible expression of respect for the deceased pontiff. At the end of the Angelus, it is customary for the popes to greet selected groups of pilgrims, Catholic associations and the citizens of Rome, who in turn contribute to the performance with waving flags and banners and with brief applauses and cheers. In short, masses have become the starting and endpoint of papal legitimacy and power.

How to understand mobilization as soft power? With the religious role of the popes taken as a given, it should be noted that the papal soft power approach is limited to questions regarding the history of papal digital communication. Contemporary papal power can be described as soft, the counterpart of traditional forms of political hard power through means of military dominance or threats; in a broad sense, it encapsulates, among other things, the ability to influence the public by means other than force or coercion and is mostly understood as a set of diplomatic skills. To quote Joseph Nye, who introduced the concept of soft power in the context of diplomatic power during the late Cold War:

> "Soft power is not merely the same as influence, though it is one source of influence. . . . Nor is soft power just persuasion or the ability to move people by argument, though that is an important part of it. It is also the ability to entice and attract. Attraction often leads to acquiescence. In behavioral terms, soft power is attractive power. In terms of resources, soft power resources are the assets . . . that produce such attraction" (Nye 2008, p. 31)

The concept of a distinct form of papal authority as soft power has been widely discussed (Byrnes 2017; Hall 1997; Mazo 2015; Sommeregger 2011; Troy 2010), and recent research on the modern papacy suggests that the successful use of soft power depends, to a large extent, on the public perception of the reigning pope, his ability to verbally and nonverbally communicate with the public and the Church's capability to regularly mobilize the masses as pilgrims in Rome and abroad (Barbato 2020a; Löffler 2018).

The next section of this paper discusses the history of papal mobilization. It starts with its pre-digital state of mobilization, before taking a closer look at the rise of a digital papacy and the transition from John Paul II to Benedict XVI and Francis. This section explains how papal mobilization works and how each of the three popes used the Internet to mobilize their legions.

The third section analyzes virtual mobilization as a potential soft power resource. Drawing on the medieval concept of virtual pilgrimage and the contemporary debate about digital pilgrimage as an alternative to physically and spiritually demanding trips, it discusses the current transformation of papal authority. It uses the case of COVID-19 as a stress test of digital papal mobilization and its potential and limitations.

2. A Short History of Papal Mobilization

The history of papal mobilization as a main source of soft power began with the popes' downfall as hard power political actors. Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, the political power of the papacy was in rapid decline. During the Napoleonic era, it lost most of its secular power. In 1799, Pius VI died in French captivity. In 1807, French troops occupied the Papal States, and Pius VII became a prisoner until his release in 1814. The political setback was tremendous: the pope's diplomatic network temporarily diminished, and its status as an accepted political player and as a negotiator among the

European powers considerably weakened. The restoration process following Vienna merely postponed his political regress. After the unification of Italy under King Victor Emanuel II in 1861 and the occupation of Rome in 1870, the papacy was politically disempowered and the Papal State formally dissolved. The papacy reached its low and a turning point (Barbato 2020b, pp. 17–18). The rise of the modern papacy had begun.

With the acknowledgement of Italian sovereignty over the formal territory of the Papal States through the Lateran Treaty in 1929, the papacy managed to maintain two pillars of its public power: its status as a recognized subject of international law and the territory of the Vatican City State, which, despite its limited size, quickly developed into a public stage of papal mass mobilization. Thus, the papacy survived the leap into modernity due to its transformation into a hybrid actor (McLarren and Stahl 2020) with a growing number of diplomatic relations and its ability to use the physical body of the masses to continuously reshape papal authority. The pope has been transformed into a sovereign without armed forces—with the commonly known exception of the colorful Papal Swiss Guard as a visible reminder of a previous form of papal authority. He developed into a diplomatic powerhouse currently entertaining 183 diplomatic relations. The nuncio, as representative of the Holy See, the Church and the pope, mirrors even further the modern papacy's status as a hybrid actor.

To summarize the current research, the rise of political papacy during the 20th century is based on the successful mobilization of the masses (Barbato and Heid 2020). The papacy managed to successfully combine different aspects of political, religious and moral power.

2.1. John Paul II and the Rise of Digital Archangels

A possible starting date for the many paths towards a digital papacy (Barbato et al. 2018) could be Christmas 1995, when, for the first time, the Holy See's official website went at least partially online. At a time when major international businesses as well as a few governments were setting up their own websites—e.g., Microsoft and the White House published their first webpages in 1994 (Izadi 2014; Bort 2014)—the papacy was, at least at the time, one of the forerunners of the digital presence. Its beginnings were rather modest. The very first page featured only a low-resolution picture of John Paul II and his Urbi et Orbi address of 25 December 1995. In the following decades, the website would transform itself into an archive of the Church as well as a papal instrument of public communication.

The groundwork for the digital papacy was paved a few years earlier in 1991, when the president of the Administration of the Patrimony of the Holy See, Cardinal Rosalio José Castillo Lara, choose Judith Zoebelein, an American nun of the Order of the Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist, to work for the Vatican as coordinator and instructor for computer-related matters. Her father worked as a programmer and she was knowledgeable with computers, having taught unemployed immigrants basic informatic skills (Zoebelein 2021) and having supervised, in 1986, the organization of computer systems for the Catholic Relief Services (Tagliabue 1999). After her arrival in Rome, she was given the task of creating a unifying standard for the separate offices and to link the computers with one another in order to establish a single Vatican Intranet. It soon became evident that, aside from creating an internal network and giving programming lessons, the time was ripe for the creation of a Vatican web presence. As the Internet continued to transform into an open public space during the early 1990s, Zoebelein pushed for the creation of an official Vatican webpage to test the public response. Joaquín Navarro-Valls, director of the Holy See's Press Office, became one of her most important allies and, in 1994, proposed the concept of a digital papacy to John Paul II as a promising form of evangelization (Zoebelein 2021). The pontiff's popularity presented a golden opportunity to mobilize Catholics around the world via the Internet. The pope quickly gave his approval. To quote Zoebelein:

> "[A]t that point it was Pope John Paul who was enormously popular and very human, someone very approachable that people really wanted to know more about. So, we said, ok let's give it a try. . . . And it's not as that Pope John Paul understood the technology, he had vision beyond that. He saw that the Church

needs to be out and needs to be something that can be a source to people that can be . . . in their living rooms if you will or be something that people can refer to. And so, he immediately said yes, do it". (Zoebelein 2016)

Thus, Zoebelein became responsible for the creation of the first Vatican homepage with a team that consisted of only two people: herself and one technician (ORF 2021). There is evidence that, during the early creation process, mobilization already became a driving force for Zoebelein. To visually represent the Church's two thousand years of history, she selected an ochre background design similar to parchment, which is still in use today. Besides creating an archive for the Vatican, the website was designed as a virtual storefront to display what the Church does and stands for (Zoebelein 2021). Early on, the website was based on a strategy of verbal and nonverbal papal communication to orchestrate a new form of virtual connection between the pope and the visitor. It is because of the Vatican website that the pope became even more publicly visible through digital photos, which became the new standard of the papacy's nonverbal communication strategy.

After a one-year trial stage, the Vatican website faced its first field test: hosting John Paul II's Urbi et Orbi message of 25 December 1995. The public response quickly overwhelmed the Vatican hardware and staff, taking many observers by surprise, including Sister Zoebelein. During the first 48 h, the website registered more than 300,000 visitors (Tagliabue 1999), an early demonstration of the potential mobilization power of a digital papacy. The decision to not only create a public papal e-mail account but also print every digital message addressed to the pope may indicate that the Vatican heavily underestimated the mobilization power of a virtual Pope John Paul II. The website could not handle the number of simultaneous requests and collapsed under the pressure (Helland 2004).

To explain the initial success of the papal digital sphere, it is important to consider the parallel physical format of papal mass mobilization. Among public papal performances, the Urbi et Orbi messages are only given on solemn occasions, traditionally on Easter and Christmas Day and upon the proclamation of a newly elected pope. According to the Catholic teaching, everyone who hears or sees it and that and is a man/woman of good will is granted an indulgence for their sins. Thus, it is an important asset of the papal mass mobilization, which already entailed the use of earlier forms of virtual participation such as listening to the radio or watching TV. As the Urbi et Orbi regularly mobilized people in Rome and in their own homes, it became the perfect opportunity to test the digital coverage of John Paul II.

An unexpected incident further increased the public awareness of the digital papacy. Due to a cold and sudden weakness, the pope temporarily suspended his message (Tagesschau 1995). The masses at St. Peter's Square and at home became worried. Since the newly created Vatican webpage included a public papal e-mail address, followers with a computer and internet connection had the unique opportunity to "directly" communicate with the pope. In the days following the event, people from all over the world sent e-mails, mostly offering prayers for the Holy Father's health and personal recovery, medical advice and even family recipes. From the very first day, the concept of e-prayers became a new phenomenon of papal mobilization, created by individual followers as a digital form of personal communication with the pope:

> "And then we had also opened an e-mail [address] for the Holy Father which we also did not realize what that would mean and we got thousands of e-mails which does not sound like much now but back then it was an enormous amount. Right after we put that page up the Holy Father over New Year's got sick with the flu so that became the news so we got a flood of e-mails of chicken soup recipes and 'this is why my grandmother says . . . ' and this is . . . 'we are hoping, we are praying for you' . . . ; but it was a phenomenon that was kind of fun. . . . We also found out that having John Paul who . . . people loved and wanted to know more about, with the e-mails all of a sudden, he became somebody they knew. So, we got e-mails saying like 'you know my sister's divorced and I do not

know what to do; she's leaving the faith because of that' or 'I have cancer and I'm dying could you pray for me'". (Zoebelein 2016)

Another important factor for the success of the Vatican's first webpage was the provision of real-time translations of papal speeches, which were usually given in Italian. Between Paul VI and Benedict XVI, the tradition to greet the different nations in their respective languages after the Urbi et Orbi was established. However, the main messages were still expressed in Italian. The website enabled the Vatican to release official translations shortly after the event.

Finally, in addition to radio and television broadcasts, followers could use the Internet to receive the papal blessing as an alternative to a pilgrimage to Rome, which further legitimized the concept of virtual religious participation. While the Internet was not the first step towards a virtual mobilization of followers, it certainly offered new and growing possibilities for the papacy and the faithful.

After the successful field test of digital papacy, the Vatican closed the website and suspended operations for 18 months, until Easter Sunday 1997. After that, no public papal e-mail address was available. The Vatican servers, which were still at work nonetheless, were named after Archangels: the server supporting the website content took the name Raphael, patron of pilgrims and travelers, to symbolize a guide for everyone crossing the digital ocean; the server providing the firewall was named Michael, the defender against Satan, now also a protector of the virtual space; and the server hosting the Vatican's e-mail accounts was called Gabriel, assuming the role of a digital messenger of the Church.

While the website has been continuously modernized behind the scenes, its original appearance as well as its core structure with the three Archangel servers remain substantially the same. However, in order to match the transformation of the Internet into the so-called Web 2.0 of the early–mid-2000s, through which the users became active communicators, designers and content creators, the papacy was also compelled to become an active virtual entity. Despite the technological limitations of the time, the Internet was in a good position early on to become an additional form of Christian pilgrimage and participation. It was certainly no coincidence that the Vatican choose the papal Urbi et Orbi as its first digital event; thanks to the increasingly widespread use of the Internet at the private level during the mid-1990s, the physically mobilized masses at St. Peter's Square, the virtual participants at home and John Paul II's sudden sickness during the event, the website received the necessary boost to be immediately noticed. The timing could not have been better.

2.2. John Paul II, Benedict XVI and the Creation of Digital Stages

Following the success of the digital mobilization, John Paul II felt compelled to further adopt the Internet as a new type of social communication. Since the 20th century, the Catholic Church has had its own definition of the term social communication in order to describe the Church's technological and normative challenges of modern communication, e.g., print media, radio, film or television. The popes began to include the Internet into their communication strategy (Löffler, forthcoming). The annual event of the World Communications Day provided an opportunity for the popes to deal with matters of communication technology. Since the introduction of World Communications Days in 1963, the popes used the event to publicly show their stance towards communication technologies, present themselves as important actors within the public discourse on communication culture and public media and further develop the Church's usage of public media.

As a mobilization tool, the Internet is mentioned by John Paul II in his World Communications Day speech in 2001, where he advocated for a more active usage of cyberspace by Catholic communities:

"Consider, for instance . . . the positive capacities of the Internet to carry religious information and teaching beyond all barriers and frontiers. Such a wide audience would have been beyond the wildest imaginings of those who preached the Gospel before us. What is therefore needed in our time is an active and imaginative engagement of the

media by the Church. Catholics should not be afraid to throw open the doors of social communications to Christ, so that his Good News may be heard from the housetops of the world!" (John Paul II 2001)

The papal message of the following year was entirely focused on the Internet, called a "new Forum for Proclaiming the Gospel", similar to the "public space" of the forum in ancient Rome (John Paul II 2002). More importantly, John Paul II defined the virtual world as a starting point for real-world mobilization: "It is important, therefore, that the Christian community think of very practical ways of helping those who first make contact through the Internet to move from the virtual world of cyberspace to the real world of Christian community" (John Paul II 2002). Pope John Paul II's vision of the Internet was that of a stepping stone towards physical mobilization, a megaphone to enhance the range of Catholic communication. This view corresponded to the technical tools of the time, including a limited bandwidth that reduced the capabilities of online communication to small pictures and text rather than videos or simulcasts.

A prime example of the papacy's early usage of modern communication technology was the virtual pilgrimage of John Paul II to the ancient city of Ur, the presumed birthplace of Abraham located in southern Iraq. Despite the tense political situation, the pope repeatedly expressed his intention to personally visit Ur as a starting point for his planned grand pilgrimage to the Holy Land during the Great Jubilee of the year 2000 (John Paul II 1999; 1994). He intended to use "Abraham's footprints" (John Paul II 2000a; 2000b) as a shared symbol of reconciliation among the three monotheistic faiths (Stanley 2000). Although the negotiations with the Iraqi government failed, the pope still intended to visit Ur. During his General Audience of 16 February 2000, John Paul II presented his plan for a virtual pilgrimage: "Since this has not been possible for Me, I would like at least spiritually to make a similar pilgrimage. Therefore . . . together we will relive the key events of Abraham's experience, knowing well that it is not only those who boast physical descent from the great Patriarch who look to him, but also all those who regard themselves as his spiritual offspring. . . . I invite you now to accompany me in prayer on my pilgrimage to the places linked to salvation history . . . " (John Paul II 2000a). What this means is that the pope transformed the concept of locus as he used the idea of the spiritual offspring as a metaphor for a shared virtual experience of pilgrimage. On February 23, following a shortened General Audience, the pope invited the assembled crowd at St. Peter's Square to stay and follow his virtual pilgrimage via large screens, as he led a liturgical celebration inside the Paul VI Audience Hall (John Paul II 2000b). Despite the term "virtual" referring to a spiritual journey, the event illustrates how the pope used communication technology to broadcast images of Ur, the surrounding desert, biblical paintings and churches (Xiarhos 2016; Stanley 2000). Thus, his virtual journey to the historic site became an example of ecumenical dialogue, with the masses representing papal authority.

The next big steps towards digital mass mobilization occurred during the papacy of Benedict XVI, as the Vatican expanded its mobilization strategy to the digital playing fields of YouTube and Twitter. On 23 January 2009, during the Holy See's press conference presenting the message of the Holy Father for the 43rd World Communications Day, the director of the Vatican Press Office, Father Federico Lombardi, announced the inauguration of several official Vatican YouTube channels in order to expand the Catholic Church's ability to communicate with the world and further improve its digital public appearance (Lombardi 2009). On the same day, the first video was uploaded. The Vatican's YouTube strategy centered on the popes' public events—e.g., Angelus, Apostolic Journeys, Audiences—depicting the multiple roles of Benedict as a religious and political leader. However, the Vatican YouTube channels were likely not used for mass mobilization. For instance, the Vatican decided to permanently deactivate the comment function as it claimed not to be able to manage the global flow of messages and responses (Lombardi 2009), thus preventing any possible interaction with its followers. The idea that the Vatican could become another content creator did not seem too far-fetched, since YouTube had already become one of the biggest public community platforms, featuring all sorts of content from

information to entertainment. However, the Vatican misjudged the importance of the platform as a virtual community where people communicate with content creators and each other, forming lasting digital communities of viewers. It chose instead to use YouTube as an alternative TV channel.

Twelve years and a new pope later, the channels' activity is still unknown to many. Since the reform of the Vatican media, the YouTube channels' subscriber numbers have grown, with 579,000 subscribers at present for the English-speaking global main channel, followed by the Spanish (578,000), Portuguese (324,000), English (192,000), Italian (172,000) and Vietnamese channels (132,000). In contrast, between early 2019 and April 2021, the French (45,400), German (20,200), Chinese (8500), Polish (6400) and Lithuanian (2400) channels barely managed to double their numbers. With the exception of videos featuring the Holy Mass on Christmas and Easter, usually obtaining several tens of thousands of views, most videos only reach a few thousand. The ongoing renewal of the Vatican media and the ensuing inclusion of its YouTube channels into the newly created Vatican News did not bring about any significant change. Although during the peak of the global pandemic in 2020–2021, Francis used video messages and YouTube live broadcasts as a last resort to meet the challenge of public mobilization, the papacy failed to create a digital community eager to watch his videos. As of today, the modern papacy does not employ YouTube as a mobilization platform, which appears striking considering its ability to successfully use the Internet to mobilize digital masses.

On 3 December 2012, three months before the resignation of Benedict XVI, the Vatican launched the first official papal Twitter accounts in eight different languages—English, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Polish, French, Arabic and Italian—with a Latin account following soon after. The first tweet was sent during the pope's weekly audience on Wednesday, December 12, displaying Benedict XVI using an iPad (O'Loughlin 2015, p. 30; Pianigiani and Donadio 2012; Donadio 2012) as alleged proof of the authenticity of a digital papacy. The resulting scene closely resembled a previous event that occurred one year earlier, when the pope also used an iPad to tweet the first message for the new information portal news.va (BBC 2011). Of course, the pope's tweet was not entirely his own product. In fact, while he was involved in the selection of his messages' topic and wording, a media team working behind the scenes wrote and translated the 140-character texts (O'Loughlin 2015).

It is difficult to assess the early success of the papal mobilization on Twitter. Within the first hours after the accounts went online, Pope Benedict reached about 250,000 followers (Pianigiani and Donadio 2012), then about 800,000 followers at the time of his first message (Donadio 2012) and about 2.5 million in mid-January 2013 (BBC 2013). However, despite this measurable success, the papacy did not have a communication strategy able to transform followers into digital legions to be physically or virtually mobilized. First of all, in the beginning, not many tweets were published—only thirty-nine over three months. This was partly due to the early decision to use the papal tweets as a digital extension of the General Audiences, but also because of Ratzinger's poor health situation during his last year in office. Secondly, the idea that Benedict XVI would personally tweet did not stand. The already established image of his papacy did not fit at all with the idea of an online pope who communicates with his followers in person. Besides the event of the first papal tweet, the media did not push the idea of a digital papacy. At the end of his papacy and three months after the launch of @pontifex, the official accounts of Benedict XVI managed to gather three million followers altogether.

2.3. Francis and the Orchestration of Digital Masses

After the resignation of Benedict XVI on 28 February 2013, and the election of Jorge Mario Bergoglio as Pope Francis on March 13, the Vatican, in addition to the situation of a papa emeritus, faced the question of how to handle Benedict's digital heritage. The Vatican decided to integrate the more or less successful digital mobilization on Twitter into the new papacy. During the interim period in between the two papacies (sede vacante), the

Vatican removed all previous papal Tweets, storing them on separate servers, and changed the account description to "Sede Vacante", thus also removing Benedict as forerunner of the following pontiff. The previous pope's followers were the only surviving element. For the first time, a successor "would be handed not only the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven, but . . . the password to the papal Twitter account and its millions of followers" (O'Loughlin 2015, p. 33).

The total number of Francis' accounts' followers is currently greater than 51.7 million, making him one of the most famous political actors of the microblogging service (BCW 2020). During the first years of his pontificate, the growth rate remained impressive, rising from 3.0 to 7.2 million followers in 2013, and then to 14.0 (2014), 19.6 (2015), 28.9 (2016), 37.5 (2017), 48.0 (2019) and 51.7 million (April 2021). Francis became one of the most followed world leaders (De Franco 2020). There are two main reasons for this success: First, in contrast to his predecessor, the public narrative of Jorge Bergoglio, who was known for his accessible and authentic approach in his previous role as Archbishop of Buenos Aires (Willey 2015; Vallely 2014; Politi 2015), was in accord with his new position as a pope who maintains a personal contact with his followers. Second, from the first day of his papacy, Francis could rely on his predecessor's foundational work in the sphere of digitalization. Only four days after his election, Francis used Twitter, asking his followers to further pray for him, a request that would become a recurring element of the papal messages: "Dear friends, I thank you from my heart and I ask you to continue to pray for me. Pope Francis" (Francis 2013).

Compared to his predecessor, Pope Francis undertook a different usage of Twitter, in both quantitative and qualitative terms. Between 2013 and 2021, the average number of daily papal messages on the German account @pontifex_de increased from 0.61 (2013) and 0.41 (2014) to 0.93 (2016), 0.96 (2017), 1.08 (2018), 1.2 (2019), 1.87 (2020) and 1.78 (May 2021). The communication style is similar to that of other papal messages such as the Angelus, further supporting the impression that the Holy Father would personally communicate with his online followers. While the pope does not send his tweets in person, he gives ideas for upcoming messages; based on that, his communication team drafts tweets in the pope's primary languages, Spanish and Italian. After Francis gives his approval, the messages are brought to the Vatican Secretary of State's office, from where the Tweets are translated and then published (see: O'Loughlin 2015). For the most part, the tweets are written in first person, and the messages are often directed towards the audience—e.g., Christians, family and society.

Since July 2019, the papacy has also released short videos on Twitter on a regular basis in an attempt to call attention to the Vatican YouTube channels. In these monthly papal prayer requests, which started in 2016, Francis assumes the role of a narrator, sitting at his desk and facing the camera/audience while talking about Christian values in everyday life or core issues of his pontificate. In addition to a verbal communication strategy that invites the audience to follow the example of Jesus, Mary or other fellow Christians, a nonverbal communication strategy characterizes the pope as a charismatic leader, through eye contact and easily understandable metaphoric gestures within a setting reproducing a personal conversation.

The papal Twitter accounts are a prime example of a largely successful digital mass mobilization. While Francis does not send his messages in person, his communication style and his narrative as charismatic leader resulted in a rise of public attention. However, while Twitter remains an important asset for concise online communication, it is only one of many digital arenas. The biggest difference between physical and digital mobilization is the Internet's multi-locality: the pope must use multiple digital stages to become as visible as possible in order to attract as many people online as possible.

The creation of a papal Instagram account on 19 March 2016, is the latest example of digital papal mobilization. Using the pseudonym @Franciscus, the Vatican publishes papal pictures and short videos to attract followers by means of nonverbal communication, as Mons. Dario E. Viganò, then prefect of the Secretariat for Communication, outlined:

"Instagram will help recount the Papacy through images, to enable all those who wish to accompany and know more about Pope Francis' pontificate to encounter his gestures of tenderness and mercy. . . . We will choose photographs from the Photographic Service of L'Osservatore Romano, selecting certain details. In this way we can show those aspects of closeness and inclusion that Pope Francis lives every day" (Sala Stampa 2016). A nonverbal communication strategy emerged that presents Francis mostly during personal interactions with individuals and as a religious leader during his trips. Compared to some prominent political figures such as Barack Obama (around 30.1), Donald J. Trump (20.5) and Recep Tayyip Erdogan (8.1), the pope's 7.6 million followers are still a low number (Statista 2020).

In contrast to Twitter with its mobilization through words of encouragement and persuasion, Instagram uses photographic images of Pope Francis in order to depict, communicate or evoke positive emotions. It implements a strategy of recurring gestures—e.g., shaking hands, hugging, touching someone's face—and motives—e.g., personal conversations, papal journeys, holy masses—to influence public opinion, and the secular media tend to reuse these positive narratives to describe the pope.

This analysis suggests that the digital mobilization of followers happens on two different fronts: the papacy uses the pope's charisma to attract digital followers in order to stay in contact, to be seen and heard and to communicate with the faithful, and the papacy uses digital communication channels to depict itself as "modern" in order to remain relevant to communicate with the public. While the Holy See managed to gather a digital crowd on Twitter, its mobilization differs from its physical counterpart. While the papacy frequently uses events such as public audiences or voyages to interact with individuals and groups, there is no replay or retweet to any individual message. As of today, there are no stories of a virtual chat with the Holy Father.

3. The Virtual, the Digital and the Physical

The idea of the virtual is an undisputed part of Christianity as well as of society and politics. It helps to understand the abstract, but more importantly, it influences the individual at the psychological level. It derives from the medieval Latin word "virtualis", meaning strength or power, and refers in scholastic philosophy to "something that exists potentially rather than actually" (MacWilliams 2002, p. 317; Lévy 1998, p. 23). The concept of virtual pilgrimage has its roots in the late Middle Ages. Due to the dangers of lengthy trips and the economic burden that came with them, a great part of the medieval population of Europe could not afford traveling to distant places such as the Holy Land. This led to the creation of what can be described as "spiritual theme parks" that "could spiritually be just as effective" (Kaelber 2011, p. 50). Local shrines became a cost-effective alternative for the faithful to experience the mobilization of a pilgrimage without having to undertake long travels.

Among the most famous examples in Europe are the shrines of Altötting, Częstochowa, Einsiedeln, Fatima, Loreto, Lourdes or Mariazell. Many apostolic voyages include papal visits to these local pilgrimage sites (see, Barbato 2020a). John Paul II visited the shrine of Our Lady of Altötting, Germany, on 18 November 1980; Benedict XVI visited the small shrine of Etzelsbach, Germany, on 23 September 2011; during his apostolic journey to Poland on the occasion of the 31st World Youth Day, on 28 July 2016, Francis celebrated the Holy Mass at the shrine of Częstochowa; and in May 2021, thirty shrines "scattered throughout the world" joined the pope's call to recite the "Rosary to pray for the end of the pandemic and for the resumption of social activity and work" (Francis 2021a).

Within the field of political thought, the categories of sovereignty, commonwealth, state, nation and people are examples of representing something invisible by means of something visible, describable and relatable (Koschorke et al. 2007; Möllers 2008; Skinner 2007, 2009, 2012). In short, the virtual can be understood as fiction that becomes reality with the power to make others act, believe, think or feel in a certain way, as it represents something that cannot be fully seen or explained.

Today's forms of digital pilgrimage are prime examples of the power of the virtual: for instance, historic sculptures or iconic imagery, such as that of the Virgin Mary or Christian Saints, are used in sites of Catholic pilgrimage to represent and uphold a tradition of local worship and to create a physical stage of mobilization where the faithful make themselves visible. Common belief and tradition are able to turn a location into a field camp of the faithful, while the location becomes the physical destination of the pilgrim's journey.

In addition, the journey of pilgrimage itself operates as "a metaphorical reminder of the Christian journey to Heaven" on which the pilgrims "walk the material roads, which evoke the spiritual road on which they also journey" (Dunn-Hensley 2020, p. 125). The pilgrim's journey becomes a crossroad between the physical and the metaphysical journey (Xiarhos 2016), with the physical hardships of the travel representing his spiritual endeavor. At least to a certain degree, the virtual is part of every form of pilgrimage as it creates a community of the faithful based on a shared physical path that represents a present, yet invisible, common faith.

3.1. The Internet as a Virtual Realm

The Internet theoretically provides a golden opportunity for the modern papacy to combine the idea of the virtual with the newly available technologies of the digital in order to combat, especially in Europe, the declining numbers of physical followers. It creates several arenas for virtual mobilization where the faithful can gather in one place in order to read, listen and watch the pope as a trans-local community, as national and regional groups or as individual followers.

While there has been an ongoing debate about the prospects of the Internet with regard to the Catholic Church and pilgrimages in particular, the most important open questions concern the authenticity of virtual representations for individual pilgrims, with a strong focus on the normative question of whether the Internet is able to provide the same experience at the psychological level (Hill-Smith 2011; Cowan 2005). In contrast, the concept of mobilization as a resource of soft power provides an alternative position, as it centers on the question of how the digital space can be used to publicly demonstrate the legitimacy of the pope. This article combines the idea of the virtual with the previously discussed research on mobilization and soft power in order to measure the current state of digital papal power.

Interestingly, even though the papacy has become more and more digital, Francis did not push for a virtual mobilization. On 17 April 2020, during a time when papal communication with the faithful and the world was mostly limited to digital messages on YouTube and Instagram, Francis spoke about the dangers of a Church going viral: "Before Easter, when the news emerged that I would celebrate Easter in an empty Saint Peter's Basilica, a bishop wrote to me, a good bishop, good; and he rebuked me. "But how come, Saint Peter's is so big, why not put at least thirty people in there, so that you can see there are people? There won't be any danger". I thought: "But, what does he have in mind, to tell me this?" I did not understand, at the time. But since he is a good bishop, very close to the people, he wanted to say something to me. When I find him, I will ask him. Then I understood. He was saying to me, "Be careful not to make the Church virtual, viral; not to make the sacraments virtual, not to make the people of God virtual. The Church, the sacraments, the people of God are concrete. It is true that in this moment we must provide this familiarity with God in this way, but so as to come out of the tunnel, not to stay inside it. And this is the familiarity of the apostles: not gnostic, not virtual, not selfish, for each one of us, but a concrete familiarity, in the people" (Francis 2021b).

A few months earlier, on 1 January 2021, Francis spoke positively about virtual mobilization efforts: "I am grateful to all those who in every part of the world, while respecting the restrictions imposed due to the pandemic, have promoted moments of prayer and reflection on the occasion of today's World Day of Peace. I think in particular of yesterday evening's virtual march organized by the Italian episcopate, Pax Christi, Caritas

and Catholic Action, as well as the one from this morning organized by Sant'Egidio, being broadcast by streaming worldwide" (Francis 2021c).

Today, the virtual pilgrimage can be broadly understood as "an Internet neologism for a Web site where people can simulate a sacred journey for educational, economic, and spiritual purposes" (MacWilliams 2004, p. 223). It does not need to compete with its counterpart, since the digital legions are an additional instrument for the modern papacy to publicly legitimize itself. In contrast to a psychological debate centered on the question about individual feelings involved in digital pilgrimages, this article offers a look into the past and present usage of the Internet as a strategic tool to mobilize the masses everywhere. It concludes that in order to successfully use the Internet, the modern papacy has to achieve the following steps:

1. Visibility: it needs to become visible online;
2. Actorness: it needs to be seen as a relevant actor;
3. Mobilization: it needs to mobilize the digital masses as participants;
4. Narrative: it needs to create a narrative of success for digital mobilization;
5. Balance: it needs to find a balance between virtual and physical mass mobilization.

While the papacy apparently achieved the first two steps, with a digital presence that has significantly increased over the past 25 years, it has not done enough to mobilize these several million digital followers to become a reliable papal power base. Despite their current numbers, the pope's digital legions have remained mostly passive, as each digital arena limits the interaction to a certain form of communication. Regardless of the capabilities of digital platforms, they cannot fully recreate some of the fundamentals of papal mobilization: the physical–spiritual experience as an individual story of being on a journey, the feeling of being part of a mass and the physical proximity to the pope and others. Especially in the early to mid-2000s, research overestimated the impact of the cyberspace as an abrupt transition into a digital age that could provide a real alternative to the physical world. While it is true that the Internet continues to change society and communication culture, offline events have not simply vanished. As Petr Kratochvíl has pointed out, the ongoing process of virtualization has, at least for the Catholic Church, not "reduced the importance of the materiality of pilgrimage", as in its current state, the "physical aspects of pilgrimage became one of the hallmarks of pilgrimage-related texts and videos" (Kratochvíl 2021, p. 5). On the contrary, it has provided opportunities to advertise mass gatherings. There is no zero-sum game between online and offline.

At this point, the modern papacy has failed to utilize its online presence as a community-generating forum where newcomers and longtime followers, believers and digital tourists are allowed to create their own virtual locations, such as open discussion groups or ad hoc private conversations. Without these basic assets of communication, the sense of a papal online community will never become particularly strong. Almost two decades ago, Christopher Helland described the very same problem, using the Vatican website as an example of the Church's shortcomings with its online communication. While the Vatican website offered a "wealth of information", unofficial Catholic sites already provided an "environment for people to talk about their religious beliefs and practices, ask challenging questions concerning their faith, and participate in a safe environment where they can open up and share religious feelings and concerns" (Helland 2004, p. 31). For example, there is no Q&A space to address the pope and no real opportunity to get in contact with the papacy or other followers besides writing short messages on Twitter or Instagram. In its current state, the papal mobilization online is a one-way street, and while this might work for public appearances in the physical realm, digital communication has always been a multi-way network.

3.2. COVID-19 as a Stress Test for Papal Mobilization

If this paper's considerations about papal mobilization are correct, then the global pandemic would be the modern papacy's greatest challenge since World War II. Thus, this section deals with the Vatican's use of the Internet during the first year of the global

pandemic, using examples of papal livestreams to quantify the pope's digital mobilization power.

The coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) reached Italy at the beginning of 2020, with major regional outbreaks in Northern Italy in February and the first reported viral disease within the Vatican on March 5 (Vatican News 2020). Following regional lockdowns, the Italian government issued an assembly ban and rules of social distancing. The Vatican took similar measures, suspending all major public events and closing St. Peter's Square and Basilica. While all scheduled papal journeys abroad were canceled, other events such as the weekly Angelus Prayers and General Audiences were transformed into virtual events.

On 27 March 2020, Francis began his digital offensive, taking the global pandemic as an opportunity to hold an extraordinary moment of prayer in the form of an Urbi et Orbi blessing. Using the visual effect of a seemingly abandoned St. Peter's Square during a rainy evening, Vatican News portrayed the pope as a communicator for all mankind. The scene broadcasted by the Vatican aimed to create the narrative of an invisible, yet present, legion of digital believers, praying with the pontiff during the pandemic.

With the help of two Christian icons, the Salus populi romani image of the Virgin Mary and the crucifix of San Marcello, combined with an orchestration of verbal and nonverbal communication, Francis prayed for a rapid end of the pandemic on behalf of all people. His prayer included the sick, their relatives and everyone exposed to the invisible risk of infection due to their work. The verbal content was accompanied by a papal body language using not only Christian symbols of blessings and veneration but also social conventions of nonverbal communication.

The images of the live broadcast generated a narrative triad of pope, location and Christian icons. Francis became the petitioner for a crowd of people that were obliged to remain at home for their own safety, while the icons were part of a Christian tradition of praying for divine assistance in times of crisis. The orchestration of the event suggests that the papacy wanted to expand the definition of the mass itself, from the concept of people visibly gathering at one location to that of a virtual community including all of humanity, the viewers, the followers and everyone involved in the event. The absent masses were represented in two ways: through the empty space and the virtual viewership on the YouTube channels of Vatican News.

Vatican News broadcasted the extraordinary papal prayer as a livestream with audio commentary on YouTube. In order to measure the potential of the papacy's mobilization power, the number of viewers was recorded every five minutes during the livestream. It included the Spanish, German, English, Portuguese, Italian and French channels (VN Spain 2020; VN German 2020; VN English 2020; VN Portuguese 2020; VN Italian 2020; VN French 2020). The combined count of views of all channels reached about 1.09 million people watching the event at the same time. At its peak, the Spanish channel had about 525,000 viewers, followed by the English channel with 270,000 and the Portuguese channel with 170,000. In contrast, the German channel only reached a maximum of about 10,000 viewers, which approximately corresponds to the channel's followers. Since the event was also broadcasted on other news portals on YouTube, the Internet in general and on television, the actual number of people who watched the extraordinary event with Pope Francis is likely to have been much larger.

The success of this digital mass mobilization was only temporary as the virtual events following the extraordinary Urbi et Orbi involved far fewer spectators: during the broadcast of the Mass of the Lord's Supper on April 9, the abovementioned channels gathered around 107,000 simultaneous viewers; both the Easter Vigil on April 11 and the Easter Urbi et Orbi message of April 12 obtained around 99,000 viewers each; and the regular event of the Regina Caeli on April 13 only attracted around 5400 viewers. These numbers indicate that the papacy is certainly in a position to mobilize an audience digitally, but its success depends above all on the occasion and the public attention: first, the public media drew attention to the extraordinary occasion of the Urbi et Orbi in advance, so that people knew

about the event; second, the pope seemed to be the only one able to fit the role of divine supplicant during a time of global pandemic and invisible dangers.

These results confirm the current papal research on mass mobilization. Among other reasons, the popes rely on public stages in order to communicate with believers in the universal church and to remain relevant; the papacy uses images of the deserted St. Peter's Square as a metaphor for its invisible digital legions at home. However, the findings also suggest that these legions are not regular troops or a community of papal followers, but rather resemble temporary mercenaries who are mostly interested in the event or the extraordinary.

4. Conclusions

Without its ability to mobilize the masses, the modern papacy faces the danger of losing not only its display of public support but also, more importantly, its legitimacy as a global hybrid actor. By adapting itself to the technological paradigm shifts that changed the rules of public communication and mobilization, the modern papacy became digital. By taking a close look at the recent history of papal mobilization, this article's outcome is that the success of digital mobilization depends to a great extent on the use of digital stages in order to create virtual communities where followers are given opportunities to communicate with each other and enjoy the illusion of a digital pope. In order to mobilize its digital masses, the papacy has to create visible and open digital locations.

After the surprising success of the Holy See's website, the Vatican's failure as a YouTube content creator and its success on Twitter and Instagram, the papacy seemed prepared to face the global pandemic. However, the lockdowns and assembly bans demonstrated the shortcomings of its digital mobilization, which was far less impactful than its physical counterpart. The sight of thousands of Christians gathered at St. Peter's Square or at any other religious or historic location is still far more important than any subscriber count or number of interactions.

The findings of this paper suggest that, despite a relatively good starting position and the ongoing centralization of the Vatican media apparatus, Francis' strategy of virtual mobilization has not achieved significant results. The global pandemic has become the first major stress test for digital mobilization as it resulted in a loss of public space for which the different virtual arenas of Instagram, Twitter and YouTube could not compensate. The papacy's use of the empty stage of St. Peter's Square hints at the importance of physical locations. The 2020 lockdowns proved that, at least at the present moment, the Internet provides no real alternative to physical forms of papal mass mobilization. It may serve as a communication device, but it is a different type of soft power. Rather, the exceptional situation seems to confirm current research on the modern papacy that describes physical forms of mobilization as the main source of papal power (Barbato and Heid 2020; Barbato et al. 2018). The papacy made itself visible online, but it has yet to become a digital actor.

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