

**Listening to Listeners in a Digital Culture:
The Practice of Listening to Digitally-Mediated Sermons**
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Abstract: *This study examines digitally-mediated sermon listening practices by interviewing twenty-nine listeners from Swedish Protestant congregations. The analysis draws on Theodore Schatzki's practice theory, focusing on the entanglement of human activity, material arrangements surrounding the preaching event, and the ends of practices—including how changes to any or all of the above impact the practice in question. The study found that listeners strove to uphold the listening practices they were accustomed to from their respective churches and attempted to carry these over into the digitally-mediated preaching event. To a large extent, they succeeded in opening and managing a "third room of preaching." Furthermore, the study highlighted the importance of knowing the ends of these listening practices. The study also demonstrated the significance of material arrangements and how changes in these arrangements sometimes led to the obstruction—or even breakdown—of listening practices. However, changes in material arrangements also inspired new practices—pointing to the need to rethink listening practices that are merely borrowed from in-church services.*

Introduction

During the last few decades, homiletics has seen a turn to sermon listeners.² An exemplary work of scholarship is the 2004 landmark study *Listening to Listeners*.³ In recent years, homileticians have begun to describe the practice of listening in more detail—for example, Theo Pleizier's empirical study of religious involvement in hearing sermons.⁴ The turn to listeners has also affected the field of homiletics in Scandinavia, including several recent qualitative studies. Marianne Gaarden interviewed listeners about their interaction with sermons and their meaning-making processes in her *Third Room of Preaching*.⁵ Together with Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen, Gaarden has argued that, in a sense, listeners function as primary authors of their own sermons as they interact with the preacher's words.⁶ Another notable Scandinavian example is Linn Sæbø Rystad's work on children as listeners.⁷ These Scandinavian homileticians emphasize the importance of materiality in the meaning-making process of listeners. Gaarden shows how the preacher's person and physicality are

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² For overviews of empirical research that focuses on the listener, see David Rietveld, "A Survey of the Phenomenological Research of Listening to Preaching," *Homiletic* 38, no. 2 (2013) and Marianne Gaarden, *Third Room of Preaching: A New Empirical Approach* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications 2021), 7–21.

³ John S. McClure, Ronald J. Allen, Dale P. Andrews, L. Susan Bond, Dan P. Mosely, and G. Lee Ramsey, *Listening to Listeners: Homiletical Case Studies* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004). See also Ronald J. Allen and Mary Alice Mulligan, "Listening to listeners: five years later", *Homiletic* 34, no. 2 (2009), 4–17.

⁴ Theo Pleizier, *Religious Involvement in Hearing Sermons: A Grounded Theory Study in Empirical Theology and Homiletics* (Delft: Eibon Academic Publishers, 2010).

⁵ Gaarden, *The Third Room of Preaching*, 55–106.

⁶ Gaarden, Marianne & Lorensen Ringgaard, Marlene, "Listeners as Authors in Preaching: Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives", *Homiletic* 38, no. 2 (2013), 28–45.

⁷ Linn Sæbø Rystad, "I Wish We Could Fast Forward It – Negotiating the Practice of Preaching," *Homiletic* 44, no. 2 (2019), 18–42.

essential for meaning-making.⁸ Lorensen and Gitte Buch-Hansen observe that the presence of other listeners affects how the sermons are heard.⁹ Furthermore, Rystad uses practice theory to show how “mediational means” such as artifacts, clothing, and narratives play an integral part in the preaching event. She concludes that it is essential to include perspectives that consider the materiality of the preaching event.¹⁰

What happens, then, when the material conditions for the practice of listening are radically altered? What happens when the preaching event is digitally mediated? What would we homileticsians discover if we listened to listeners in digital contexts and cultures?

While the number of online and/or digitally-mediated preaching studies is rapidly increasing, these studies focus solely on the preacher and/or the specific digital medium involved.¹¹ In-depth analyses of the *listeners’* perspectives on digitally-mediated preaching are virtually non-existent.¹² This article examines the practice of listening to digitally-mediated sermons and, since there is a lacuna in research, suggests some areas in which this research can be further developed.

I will argue that listeners are able to uphold their listening practices in the digitally-mediated preaching event; this supports the hypothesis that listeners are interactive co-authors of the sermon and preachers have limited control over their listeners’ meaning-making. Yet important differences between the local preaching event and the digitally-mediated service can also make it difficult for listeners to uphold what they think are the proper ends to the listening practice. Changes in material arrangements may lead to the obstruction, or even the destruction, of listening practices. However, new material arrangements may also inspire new listening practices.

An analysis of group interviews with twenty-nine active members from Protestant congregations in the South of Sweden, drawing on the practice theory of Theodore Schatzki, serves as the foundation for this work. The results will be discussed in light of recent homiletical studies about the practice of listening to sermons.

Concepts, Material, and Methods

This is a study of digitally-mediated practices of listening to a sermon. Accordingly, two key concepts are essential for this article: “digitally mediated” and “practices.” As I present the two key concepts, I will also describe the source material and the theoretical approach used in the analysis.

Digitally-mediated Source Material

For this article, I have chosen the “digitally-mediated” concept instead of the more frequently used term, “online preaching.” “Digitally-mediated” discloses important assumptions

⁸ Gaarden, *The Third Room of Preaching*, 51–68.

⁹ Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen and Gitte Buch-Hansen, “Listening to the voices: refugees as co-authors of practical theology,” *Practical Theology* 11 (2018), 29–41.

¹⁰ Linn Sæbø Rystad, “Preaching at the thresholds – Bakhtinian polyphony in preaching for children” in *Practice, Practice Theory and Theology: Scandinavian and German Perspectives*, eds. Kristine Helboe Johansen and Ulla Schmidt (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2022), 165–184.

¹¹ See for example Sunggu A. Yang, “The Word Digitalized: A Techno-Theological Reflection on Online Preaching and Its Types,” *Homiletic* 46, no. 1 (2020), 75–89; Anna-Katharina Lienau, “Kommunikation des Evangeliums in social media,” *ZThK* (2019) 117: 489–522, Michael P. Knowles “E-Word? McLuhan, Baudrillard, and Verisimilitude in Preaching,” *Religions* 13, no. 12:1131 (2022), 1–16.

¹² I stand ready to be corrected, but I have not found anyone.

that impact how the source material is created and understood. As the editors of *Digital Religion* point out, digital media and technology are intertwined with everyday life, including religious practices. There are no clear distinctions between being online and offline anymore.¹³ The term “online” may also imply that “un-mediated” preaching exists. However, as Teresa Berger has acknowledged: all religion is mediated in some way.¹⁴

As scholars in digital ethnography highlight, digital mediation is characterized by multiplicity and can be experienced in a million different ways, depending on the software, hardware, context, and how a person chooses to interact with them.¹⁵ This insight has prompted attempts to categorize digitally-mediated sermons.¹⁶ For example, Tripp Hudgins offers three categories: *social media platform sermons*, where the preaching event in the local church is recorded and disseminated afterward in social media; *live from the pulpit sermons*, where the preaching is live-streamed from the local church; and *online sermons for online churches*, in which there is no congregation gathered in a local church.¹⁷ The listeners in this study have engaged in all three categories—on occasion, even experiencing all of them within the same community, as their digitally-mediated practices and those of their local congregation changed during different stages of the pandemic.

As discussed by Jonas Kurlberg and Alexander Chow, the development of digital transition strategies on the part of churches was influenced by governmental restrictions at the local level.¹⁸ Unlike many other countries, a complete lockdown was never imposed in Sweden. Instead, there were fluctuating and varied restrictions on the number of people allowed to gather for local events, including worship services. These changed from five hundred people on March 12th, 2020, to fifty people two weeks later, to eight in November 2020. In June 2021, the restrictions were lifted—only to be lowered back to fifty in December 2021. As a result of these shifting limitations, congregations generally moved from *social media platforms* and *live from the pulpit sermons*, with up to fifty people present in the local church, to *online sermons for the online churches* when the restrictions hardened.

However, the format was not the only change. There are many ways to be a digitally-mediated church. John Dyer makes a distinction between “broadcast church” (via one-way mediums like YouTube) and “interactive church” (which uses two-way interactive mediums like Zoom).¹⁹ In Swedish Protestant congregations, the transition from digital platforms that only utilized one-way broadcasting to the adoption of platforms that allowed for a higher degree of

¹³ Heidi Campbell and Ruth Tsuria, “Introduction to the Study of Digital Religion,” in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religion in a Digital Age* (2nd edition), ed. Heidi Campbell and Ruth Tsuria, (London/New York: Routledge, 2021), 1–22.

¹⁴ Teresa Berger, *@Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds* (London/New York: Routledge, 2018), 7.

¹⁵ Sarah Pink, Heather Horst, John Postill, Larissa Hjorth, Tania Lewis and Jo Tacchi, *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practices* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2016), 10; Christine Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, Embodied and Everyday* (London & New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 26–30.

¹⁶ Yang, “The Word Digitalized,” 83.

¹⁷ Tripp Hudgins, “Preaching Online,” *Anglican Theological Review* 101, no. 1 (2019), 79–88.

¹⁸ Jonas Kurlberg and Alexander Chow, “Two or Three Gathered Online: Asian and European Responses to COVID-19 and the Digital Church,” *Studies in World Christianity* 26, no. 3 (2020), 299–318.

¹⁹ John Dyer, “Exploring Mediated *Ekklesia*: How We Talk about Church in the Digital Age,” in *Ecclesiology for a Digital Church: Theological Reflections on a New Normal*, ed. Heidi Campbell and John Dyer (London: SCM Press, 2022), 5–8.

interaction was quite common.²⁰ Some of the listeners in this study reported that their congregations made such a change.

The fourteen interviews analyzed here are part of the source material that was created in the framework for a larger research project in which four researchers followed twenty-four local congregations from five Protestant denominations in the region of Småland (in the south of Sweden) during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic (April 2020-June 2021). The interviews were conducted at the end of this period, in the spring of 2021.²¹ To protect the identity of the participants, listeners were interviewed in groups of 2–3 people and are subsequently referred to as a group.²²

A total of twenty-nine persons were interviewed. Half of the interviewees (15) belong to the Lutheran majority church, the Church of Sweden (CoS), and half (14) belong to four so-called Free church denominations.²³ These include the Uniting Church (UC, a merger of the Mission Covenant Church of Sweden, the United Methodist Church of Sweden, and the Baptist Union of Sweden); the Swedish Pentecostal Movement (PM); Interact; and the Swedish Mission Alliance (SMA). The sampling was made within the overarching research project's framework, which dealt with comparisons between the CoS and the Free churches. While further comparisons may also be relevant, these are not the main focus of this article.

The interviews covered a wide range of topics related to the entire life of the congregation during the first year of the pandemic and not just digitally-mediated preaching. This context affects what they say in their responses. Like Theo Pleizier, I found that “there is some *vagueness* in how listeners distinguish between the worship service as a whole and the sermon in particular.”²⁴ According to Pleizier, this is because listeners often experience the service and sermon as an inseparable whole.²⁵ Because of this, the analysis also necessarily includes what listeners say about the worship service considered in its entirety.

Listening Practices

The second key concept is “listening practice.” Here, I follow the lead of several Scandinavian homileticians who draw on practice theories in the analysis. As previously stated, practice theories may be useful in the field of homiletics as they draw attention to how

²⁰ Frida Mannerfelt, “Old and New Habits: The Transition to Digitally-Mediated Worship in Four Swedish Free Church Denominations during COVID-19,” in *Svensk frikyrklighet i pandemin: En studie av församlingen i corona och corona i församlingen*, eds. Ulrik Josefsson and Magnus Wahlström, (Research report from the Institute of Pentecostal Studies No. 9, 2022), 81–82.

²¹ The author of this article was responsible for conducting interviews with employees and members of the congregations; in total, 40 interviews with 64 persons. The employees served as gatekeepers who provided names of active members who might be suitable participants. Each person was contacted individually and 2–3 persons were selected for participation. The project has been approved 2021-02-16 by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (SERA). Dnr. 2020-06823.

²² Throughout the article, the shared interviews are referred to as “groups,” the letter “S” (for Church of Sweden) or “F” (for Free churches), and a number accompanies each.

²³ In Sweden, these protestant churches are often referred to – and self-identify – as “Free churches,” where “free” signals an emphasis on relative freedom of structure, leadership, and liturgical forms as opposed to the structures in the CoS. For a discussion of the concept “Free churches,” see Joel Halldorf and Fredrik Wenell, *Between the State and the Eucharist: Free Church Theology in Conversation with William T. Cavanaugh* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2014), 6.

²⁴ Pleizier, Theo, *Religious Involvement in Hearing Sermons* (Delft: Eburon Academic Publishers, 2010), 165.

²⁵ Ibid.

materiality plays an essential role in the complex process of the interpretation and communication of the preaching event.²⁶

Practice theories are not only advocated by homileticians but are often also referred to in handbooks on digital ethnography as beneficial for empirical studies. Since digital technology is embedded in human life, it tends to become invisible and therefore ignored in analysis. Practice theories draw attention to the materiality of digitality and its implications, while at the same time enabling an approach that acknowledges but does not overemphasize the significance of media.²⁷ In other words, practice theories provide a productive approach to the study of the practice of listening to digitally-mediated sermons.

In the analysis put forth in this article, the practice theory of Theodore Schatzki has informed the analytical questions explored throughout. According to Schatzki, “the social” consists of *nexuses of bundles of practices*. These “bundles” consist of the entanglement of *human activity* and *material entities*, often as a sequence of actions (*chain of events*) in relationship to entities grouped as *material arrangements*. Schatzki underlines the importance of not overlooking material entities’ part in practices.²⁸ Accordingly, an analysis of listening practices must pay careful attention to both human activity and the material arrangements involved.

The bundles of practice are *organized* through *rules*, *pools of understanding*, and *teleoaffective structures*. Rules are explicit directives and instructions, often written down. Pools of understanding are a combination of practical and general understandings—for example, the practical knowledge of where to tap your finger on the mobile phone to download and launch Zoom, as well as the more generalized knowledge that it is possible in the first place to participate in worship via Zoom.²⁹ Teleoaffective structures are an important concept in Schatzki’s thinking. According to Schatzki, human activity is teleological, that is, directed toward an end. People act for desired *ways of being* or the expectation of a particular *state of affairs*.³⁰ This means that an analysis of listening practices needs to attend to the organization of the practices, particularly the question of which *ends* the listeners are involved in when they engage in the practice.

Social changes occur when: a) humans engage in *chains of activity*; and/or b) through *material events and processes*. Schatzki underlines that human activity is always the principal generator of social change. A classic example is technological innovation which comes about primarily through human activity.³¹ However, while material entities are intertwined with human activity, they may also sometimes engage in their own events and processes without the involvement of humans and these may also lead to social change. Schatzki’s example from his

²⁶ Rystad, “I Wish We Could Fast Forward It”, 18–42; Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen, *Dialogical Preaching: Bakhtin, Otherness and Homiletics* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 21–40; Tone Stangeland Kaufman and H.O. Mosdøl, “More than Words: A Multimodal and Socio-material Approach to Understanding the Preaching Event” in *Preaching Promises within the Paradoxes of Life*, eds. Johan Cilliers and Len Hansen (Stellenbosch: African Sun Media, 2018), 123–132; Linn Sæbø Rystad, *Overestimated and underestimated: A Case Study of the Practice of Preaching for Children with an Emphasis on Children’s Role as Listeners*, PhD Thesis (Oslo: MF Norwegian School of Theology, 2020); Tone Stangeland Kaufman (ed.), *Forkynnelse for barn og voksne* (Oslo: Prismet bok, 2021).

²⁷ Pink et al., *Digital Ethnography*, 41–58.

²⁸ Theodore Schatzki, *Social Change in a Material World* (London & New York: Routledge, 2019) 26–27.

²⁹ Schatzki, *Social Change in a Material World*, 30–32.

³⁰ Theodore Schatzki, *The Timespace of Human Activity: On Performance, Society, and History as Indeterminate Teleological Events* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2010), 111–115.

³¹ Schatzki, *Social Change in a Material World*, 78–104.

2019 book seems prophetic in retrospect: that is, it is based on a biological infection. Finally, due to the entanglement of human activity and material entities, it is often difficult to decide which factors ultimately brought about particular changes.³² Following Schatzki, therefore, any analysis of the practice of listening to digitally-mediated sermons must pay attention to changes in all of the above: chains of activity, material events and processes, and their organization.

With practice theory as a framework, the research questions guiding the analysis in this study are: How do the listeners describe their listening practices? What kind of activities and material arrangements make up that practice? To what ends are they engaging in the practice? Do the listeners describe changes to their listening practices, and if so, what kinds of changes do they describe? And how might the results be understood in dialogue with recent homiletical research on the practice of listening to sermons? The findings will be discussed through the prism of a final research question: How can the results of this study be informed by recent studies on listening practices?

Results

[Interviewer]: It is Sunday; it is time for a digitally-mediated worship service. What do you do?

[Interviewee 1]: I usually broadcast from the phone to the TV. Often it is just the children and me. And earlier in this period we lit some candles and things like that. I think we have stopped doing that lately, and perhaps we have become less motivated to participate as time passed. A little less focus and things like that. But otherwise, it has been on the TV, and the hymnbook on the table, and some crafts for my youngest daughter, and my eldest has her own Bible and takes notes. [laughs] Well, the children usually come directly from the bed, and sometimes we eat breakfast at the same time [as the service].

[Interviewer]: What do *you* do?

[Interviewee 2]: Well, I want to participate, so I sit down. I only use my phone, so I sit in a place where I can put it down and still hear and see well. Because now it is worship, and I want to participate, of course the hymnbook is out, and in the beginning, I lit candles too. I even stood up for the creed. But lately—neither candles nor standing. But no crafts or things like that because it is worship, and I want to participate.

[Interviewee 1]: It has become a standing joke in our house when the pastor says “*Please be seated,*” we are already seated! [laughs] And every time it happens, someone says “*Thank you,*” and then we laugh at it. It is not entirely as it used to be.

There are several important things expressed in this quote from group F8. First, the listeners uphold their usual practices for a Sunday morning: they attend a worship service. Second, to uphold this practice, they not only engage in their regular activities; they also use

³² Ibid. 106.

material entities and arrangements that they are used to from the local church (candles, hymnbooks, Bibles) or they try to replicate the material arrangements of the church space. Third, they express a clearly desired way of being, or state of affairs, with the practice: participation in the worship service. Fourth, they mention new material arrangements; these include primarily digital technologies but because of the nature of digital mediation, other new material arrangements may be introduced into the practice, like the couch or the breakfast table. These material arrangements vary, depending on the kind of technology the listeners use. And fifth, the practices gradually change in relation to these new material arrangements. Practices like standing up no longer make sense. Instead, they begin to engage in new practices, such as eating breakfast together while listening. These themes run through the fourteen group interviews and will structure the presentation of the results.

Upholding Familiar Listening Practices through Activities

The practice of attending a worship service and listening to a sermon was considered necessary to the listeners in this study. They were accustomed to doing both and frequently mentioned the importance of upholding these vital routines and habits. Most felt that upholding these practices was best done through digitally-mediated worship services. For example, the listeners in group S1 reported that they had been offered printed orders for home worship on their own but never used them. When asked why, they said it was “the power of habit.” The digitally-mediated worship felt closer to what they were used to.

Upholding these familiar practices was done in several ways. Listeners commonly mentioned worshipping “at the proper time” on Sunday morning. Although digital mediation often permitted them to listen whenever they wanted, quite a few agreed that gathering at the same time was important. So was the service’s order. Listeners expressed a preference for the order typically followed by their local church. Notably, several of the Free church listeners also expressed this same preference. Typically, they would claim, as did group F1, that “it is important to keep the things we can have the same way as before for everyone to feel at home.”

Upholding Familiar Listening Practices through Material Arrangements

When the listeners were asked about their practices, it was striking how frequently material arrangements were mentioned—for example, in their choice of preacher. When asked which preachers they chose to listen to—especially in light of having digital access to nearly all the preachers in the world—the listeners almost always stated that they preferred listening to their own preacher from their own local church. When asked why, they frequently mentioned the preacher as being part and parcel of a combination of material arrangements that they were used to interacting with. Often, when asked why they chose a particular preacher, listeners answered by talking about their community and church instead. Like the listeners in focus group S8:

[Interviewee 2]: I have mostly stuck with the community I belong to. That sense of belonging has been important and is important, so it is my choice to listen to the [local service I am used to]. I have listened to other broadcasts too. But to me, it is important to belong to a community.

[Interviewee 1]: I would probably have done [the same] if the community I belong to had broadcasted [from the church we typically attended]. I would have followed that [broadcast], especially for the sake of the children. I am more

flexible myself. But to them, at least for my youngest, it is important to recognize the church. To know that I have been there for real many times, to feel at home.

The quotes above show that the preacher is associated with the community and the church. These things are important to listeners, especially for the listener whose congregation chose to broadcast from only one of the church locations in the denomination and not from the location the listener typically attended before the pandemic. Earlier in the interview, the listener talked about disappointment and “homelessness.” This is a recurring theme in many of the interviews: they chose preachers from their own congregation since they considered that community “family” and “home.” Even if their preacher wasn’t the “best,” they nevertheless felt committed to their community and church. These quotes also show another recurring theme: while some listeners do listen to other preachers, they tend to do it afterward, once their own local digitally-mediated service has concluded.

Notably, one group of listeners also mentioned that they listened to their own preacher because it was the most convenient option. This group consisted of older CoS listeners who found digital technology difficult to navigate. It was more convenient since they knew where to find the link on the community home page, and sometimes even got reminders on their smartphones (“[name of the congregation] has started a live stream. Do you want to join?”).

As mentioned earlier, continuing to uphold the practices listeners were used to was sometimes also related to the church building. Listeners mentioned two reasons for this. First, the church building itself was tied to the experience of community. They not only wanted to recognize the people; they wanted to recognize the church, also. Second, recognizing the church made falling into the routine of proper practices much easier.

Several listeners mentioned that they now realized how important the local church space had been for their ability to listen and participate. It helped them to focus. Furthermore, listeners realized that the material space of the local church also contributed to their meaning-making. Such was the case for this listener in group S4:

I like being able to sit and watch the altarpiece, the cross, the paintings—to sink into them. [...] If my mind strays away, I can watch the altarpiece and Jesus who kneels there, and the focus is [on] something else [than it is at home]. The *words* might be the same, but their experience and strength are stronger in the church space.

This aspect was also mentioned by Free church listeners who usually have fewer embellishments in their churches. The significance of the church building points to the role that material arrangements play in upholding practices. When listeners did not have access to the material arrangement of their church buildings, they made other material arrangements that were in accordance with what they would normally see and use in a worship service in their local church. They lit candles and put out icons, brought out Bibles and pillows for kneeling (Free church listeners) and hymnbooks (CoS listeners), and in general tried to arrange a space in their home that resembled the conditions found in their local church. Both CoS and the Free church listeners also commonly mentioned changing into Sunday clothes.

Upholding the Familiar Ends of Listening Practices?

Throughout the interviews, it became clear that listeners engaged in activities related to material arrangements that they were familiar with in order to uphold the familiar ends. Notably, many of them stated that they succeeded. They reached the expected and desired ends of the practice, often expressed as “reacting,” “being moved,” “getting nourishment,” and “being transformed.” If this happened, the sermon had “worked.”

The fact that preaching “worked” is particularly interesting since the interviews are replete with statements indicating that digital mediation had caused a massive change. Some interviewees even cried at the thought of what had been lost: a sense of community that came from the constitutive elements of gathering, communal singing, holy communion, the imposition of hands during prayer, and so on. But there were no significant changes regarding the element of preaching. Preaching was the one thing that “worked”—or, at least, listening did. Several Free church interviewees were lay preachers and had experienced preaching “from both ends.” While they thought digital mediation led to significant differences in the practice of *delivering* a sermon, they felt the practice of listening to a sermon remained substantially the same.

Notably, when asked why preaching “works,” the most common answer was that preaching is—mostly, but not entirely—a one-way communication. But there were some minor differences, and these differences often affected the listeners’ ability to uphold the ends they desired. When asked to describe the difference, they typically mentioned three things. First, the presence of other listeners in the room was thought to create a unique atmosphere that impacted their meaning-making. A listener from Group F5 stated: “I think it is different to be in the local church then because you can hear others react even if you do not react yourself.” Words were experienced as “stronger” when they saw that others were moved by them, also. Listeners mentioned this from both CoS and Free church denominations.

However, there were some differences that seemed to be specific to particular denominations. CoS listeners typically mentioned that they could not be seen by the preacher and/or other congregants. One listener in focus group S5 elaborated on this by stating that if the preacher only sought eye contact with the people in the church and not with the listeners behind the camera, this listener could not “see—feel—that it is given to *me*.”

Like the listeners in focus group F3, listeners from Free churches sometimes debated where there was a difference. When asked if there was a difference when it came to preaching, they stated:

[Interviewee 1]: No, I do not think so. Because—well, how do I say this [laughs]—it might be for better or worse, but I mean—in reality, the sermon is one-way communication, at least in our church. Not like a conversation in a cell group when you can twist and turn different angles, like in a Bible study. But it is one person who is preaching, and the others sit quietly, no matter if it is digital or not. That is why I do not think that there is a difference.

[Interviewee 2]: No, I disagree. The difference is smaller, but I would not say it is insignificant. [...] And that is probably connected to the singing, because the element of worship songs that comes afterward is often a moment when you reflect on the sermon and respond in singing or prayer. [...] God is speaking something in the sermon, and I get to respond afterward. But I have not done that in the same way during this period. [...] It becomes slightly more like just a transfer of information.

While the first listener described the sermon as “one-way communication” and saw no differences between digitally-mediated sermons and local preaching, the second thought that *singing* is connected to the preaching event in a special way, as the moment when the listener *responds* to the sermon. The second listener also mentioned “transfer of information” as an undesired end.

The listeners in this study were generally clear on what they thought were the wrong ends of the listening practice. Several of the listeners mentioned watching TV to explain the difference. The purpose of watching TV is to be entertained, which is not the purpose of listening to a sermon. Furthermore, when watching TV, you are a mere spectator. When you listen to a sermon, you are expected to engage on a deeper level, not as a distant onlooker. Some of the listeners found this difficult and stated that they had to consciously decide to listen to a sermon in order to not slip into the role of a spectator simply looking for entertainment.

The listeners mentioned two things that increased the risk of becoming a spectator. The first was to worship alone. As group F3 puts it: “You easily become a mere spectator when you sit by a screen [...] if you are alone in front of the TV, I think it becomes more difficult.” The second reason relates to the medium’s degree of interactivity and the platform used in the digitally-mediated service. The listeners who had experiences with both broadcasted and interactive digital platforms stated that the latter makes you less of a spectator. As group S6 stated:

It works if you run it on Discord, Zoom, Teams, or something like that. But just sitting there and watching on YouTube, it feels like—well, when you do a service, you usually have a congregation. Everyone participates, and we answer and things like that. But if you watch YouTube or something, you become an audience.

Simply put, according to group S6, it is easier to achieve the ends of the practice of listening to a sermon if you are not entirely alone, and if the sermon is mediated from a digital platform that allows for interaction. However, the listener's mindset was also crucial to ensuring that the listening practices were not performed to the wrong ends. As group S5 noted:

There is a risk that it becomes a performance at home because it is up to *you* what you make of it if you can shut out everything else and make it your own. And if you can, it can be wonderful. But it can also become like any other TV show: something that you watch. It is up to you when you sit there in front of your screen.

Here, the listener thinks that the practice of listening can be performed to different ends—and that it is up to the listener to make sure that they engage with the right approach and mindset.

Upholding Familiar Practices in Relation to New Material Arrangements

As previously mentioned, the differences the listeners experienced also related to a change in material arrangements. Some arrangements (like the church building) were lost, some were reproduced (like candles and hymnbooks), and some were entirely new. In digitally-mediated preaching events, digital technology and media, unsurprisingly, play a prominent role.

The interviews made it apparent that there were various kinds of digital material arrangements, including multiple ways a worship service and sermon might be mediated. The listeners engaged with different hardware and software, using them differently in their various contexts. There was a fascinating interplay between the choice of technology and the social conditions of the listener. The listeners' descriptions of their practices showed a clear pattern. Generally, if there were more than one listener at the location (often a family), they would broadcast the service on the TV screen in front of the couch in the living room. If the listener were in a single household, they would usually be seated comfortably (for example, in an armchair), using an iPad or a smartphone. Sometimes the listener already had a designated place for prayer in their home, where they would also sit for services. In cases where the listener was part of a larger household in which they were the only Christian, they would sit in their bedrooms with the door closed, using a laptop or a smartphone. As indicated above, listeners who were alone found it more difficult to engage in the practice of listening. Furthermore, the ones who were the only Christians in their family described how the new material arrangements made it impossible to perform the practice to the desired degree. This listener from group S4 describes their difficulty:

I have been sitting with my laptop in my bed or on the couch [...] and decided to watch this, but it is futile. [...] Or, it is possible, but it is—you try to replicate something irreplaceable, and it always ends with me feeling disappointed and lonely.”

Here, new material arrangements caused listening practices to break down. Notably, for one of the listeners in group S6, the breakdown led to the invention of *new practices*. They went out into the garden to pray and listen to music—using songs that functioned as sermons or messages to the listener. Interestingly, since the songs were played on Spotify, the listener still used the same material arrangements as they had before in the digitally-mediated service (a smartphone and headphones). But in the new practices described above they were now being used differently, resulting in the listener reaching the desired end: “I realized this is wonderful. I had found something of the thing that disappeared.”

There is an interesting denominational difference in the setup of material arrangements. The Free Church listeners mostly belonged to the category of those who worshipped on the couch in front of the TV with the family. There were, of course, exceptions, as in the case of listeners who used Zoom. Because many of those using Zoom felt they needed access to a camera or webcam to share their own video, they used their laptops. The CoS listeners often belonged to the category of listeners who worshipped alone.

The new digital material arrangements did not only impact and reflect the social life of the listeners; they also led to entirely new material arrangements. Most commonly mentioned were the couch and the kitchen table. Notably, several of the listeners reported that they moved from the couch to the kitchen table over time. A few of the listeners who worshipped alone also reported moving to the kitchen or dining table over time. The reason for this transition is a new practice: drinking and eating. In the next section, I will return to these changes in practice and explore their relation to the new material arrangements.

Many of the listeners also mentioned how material arrangements that relate to everyday life became included in the practice. Since the listeners were “worshipping amid the chaos of life,” as one of them put it, everyday material arrangements such as laundry, plants that need to be watered, visitors, and the sound of the microwave were all drawn into the listening practice.

These were often described as distracting and contrasted with the features of the local church building. Typically, it was these everyday material arrangements that prompted the listeners' insights into how important the church building had been to their listening practices.

New Material Arrangements in Relation to Changes to Listening Practice

As indicated in the previous section, new material arrangements sometimes led to changes in listening practices. One of the new practices relates to the kitchen table. Several listeners stated that, as time passed, they started having coffee, tea, or breakfast during worship services. Listeners in group F4 said:

In the beginning, we had breakfast before [the service], but after a while, [...] we had “fika.” We always set the table. I think we did it partly for our teenagers' sake. It became something extra to sit and eat together in front of the TV; it became a thing that we thought was positive. It is a little different from what you usually do, but it was a way to gather.

This group's quote represents the listeners' positive view of this new practice. This kitchen table-focused practice was seen as connected to the practice of gathering that they were used to in church. Some listeners also made parallels to the practice of having a cup of coffee after the service and stated that the two “rituals”—the worship service and the gathering afterward—had blended into each other. In this quote, the listener also describes how the practice of having breakfast facilitated the participation of teenagers. Other parents of teenagers reported the same phenomenon. Young people, usually characterized as reluctant to go to church, participated more willingly from the kitchen table.

As mentioned earlier, parents of younger children thought that digitally-mediated worship facilitated participation for them too. The children could behave like children—make noises, play, or even throw tantrums—and see the service elements better than they usually would have when seated in the children's corner in the back of the church. However, parents of smaller children whose community offered Sunday School for children were not as keen. They felt that their children missed out on something: learning the practices of the Christian faith.

Another change due to the new material arrangements was the ability to participate on occasions when the listeners would not have been able to otherwise. Two of the listeners described how their chronic pain sometimes made them unable to attend church. One of them cried with joy as they spoke about how they could now access God's comforting word in their suffering. Other listeners described how they were now able to listen afterward to the service on occasions when they would otherwise have missed out entirely. In these cases, it was primarily the sermon they were interested in.

A third change was that the listeners started to listen to more sermons—in addition to the sermon they had already heard. They found it enriching to hear different interpretations of the same biblical text. When asked who these preachers were, several mentioned preachers from congregations with whom they had some other previous relationship. They also chose “famous and skilled” preachers in notable ecclesial leadership positions. Notably, there seemed to be pronounced ecumenical crossover as denominational borders were frequently breached. One listener was critical of this new practice and wondered if it might not be performed to the right end. Did listening to different sermons and preachers really “make you transform your life” or was it just entertainment?

Interestingly, the listeners that listened to more than one sermon from different sources sometimes reported that they engaged somewhat differently in the practice of listening while doing so. They did not try to copy the practices of the local church at all. Instead, they would listen while engaging in activities that included everyday material arrangements like cleaning, driving, walking, and cooking. They did not think these arrangements disrupted the listening practices in these cases. Instead, they helped facilitate the experience, just as with the practice of eating breakfast and drinking coffee.

Listening to other preachers could be a conscious choice, but it is noteworthy that some listeners reported they sometimes “got stuck” watching YouTube and engaged with new sermons somewhat by happenstance. After the particular service they had decided to watch was finished, they sometimes received further suggestions from the platform’s algorithm: “If you liked this video, perhaps you would like to watch another one like this?”—and then a new worship service would start rolling.

Discussion

In this section, I will discuss the findings in light of recent homiletical research on listening practices that I presented at the beginning of the article. This research offers several frameworks for understanding the results and suggests an orientation for research on sermon listeners in a digital culture.

To the listeners in this study, it was essential to uphold the practices of participation in worship and listening to sermons. They upheld these practices through the same activities they were used to from local church services, including gathering at a particular time, following liturgical practices, and using familiar material arrangements such as candles and hymnbooks. They also chose their regular preacher, community, and church building. The listeners could also reach the desired and expected ends of their listening practices: they found that preaching “works” in the digitally-mediated preaching event.

The fact that generally preaching “worked” but nevertheless broke down for some, and that many listeners perceived differences between local services and digitally-mediated services, might be helpfully understood through Theo Pleizier’s model of listening religiously to a sermon. Based on his own interviews with listeners, Pleizier describes three listening stages necessary for a sermon to “work”: opening up, dwelling in the sermon, and actualizing faith. To Pleizier, the word “dwelling” is essential since his listeners describe their interaction with the sermon as a spatial experience in which they become part of a religious world performed by the preacher in the preaching event. In other words, the sermon is a space in which they can perceive something.³³

According to Pleizier, there is a communal dimension to all three stages of the practice of listening. The presence of the community plays a part in the opening stage when the listeners prepare for listening through liturgy and being in the community; as well as in the dwelling stage, when they sometimes dwell in the sermon on behalf of others; and also in the final stage, when faith is actualized in remembrance.³⁴ As I have shown, the differences the listeners experienced all pertain to this communal dimension. They missed the church building, the preacher’s gaze, and the community’s reactions. Furthermore, the listening practices tended to break down the most when the listener was alone. A general principle thus emerges: when the communal dimension is weakened, the practices become more fragile and prone to interruption.

³³ Pleizier, *Religious Involvement in Hearing Sermons*, 188.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 278.

When the communal aspect is enhanced through actions and arrangements that facilitate greater connection, such as interactive digital platforms, listening together with others, and the entangled triad of their usual preachers, churches, and communities, the practice of listening is easier to uphold.

This study has also pointed to the importance of knowing the ends of listening practices. “It is up to you when you sit there in front of your screen”—that is, the listener must listen with the proper purpose or risk becoming a distanced spectator. These descriptions of the importance of intentionality, of knowing the ends, alongside the fact that listeners reported being able to uphold their listening practices even in a digitally-mediated preaching event, support Gaarden and Ringgaard Lorensen’s claim that listeners can be understood as authors of the sermon as they interact with the preacher’s words to create meaning.³⁵ Listening to listeners in a digital culture underlines their insight: listeners are indeed authors of the sermon.

However, the importance of knowing the ends of the practice raises the question: what about people who have not yet learned the *telos* of these listening practices? What about the children mentioned in this study whose parents voiced concern that they might not learn the practices of the Christian faith in a digitally-mediated environment? Linn Sæbø Rystad’s study of children’s listening practices confirms that these fears may have some basis. Rystad found that children did not always know that one of the ends of listening was *transformation*, including the application of what had been said to their own lives. Instead, they connected the activity to an end they were familiar with from school: taking in information. Rystad points to the importance of teaching listeners the practice of listening, including the intended ends.³⁶ While Rystad agrees with Pleizier that preaching is a social activity involving preachers and listeners, she believes Pleizier is wrong to assume that both of them share an understanding of preaching as a religious event. Her study shows this is not necessarily the case.³⁷

However, as Gaarden has demonstrated in her empirical study, listeners still interact with the sermon even if they do not listen religiously. Like Pleizier, she uses spatial categories to describe what happens when a sermon works: a “third room of preaching” is erected, and meaning-making occurs in the interaction between the preacher’s outer words and the listener’s inner experience.³⁸ According to Ilona Nord, there is reason to believe that this spatial feature of the sermon is enhanced by digital mediation. In a discussion on “the virtual dimension of homiletics,” Nord makes the case that the experience of living in a digital culture and inhabiting virtual worlds that are entangled with the real world might facilitate this creative function of the sermon. Drawing on Albrecht Grözinger’s idea that the sermon’s task is to “imagine mankind into God’s horizon of possibility,” Nord argues that preachers ought to make use of digital mediation to invite listeners to a life that is centered on God’s possibilities and make the sermon a “creative space” where they might imagine these possibilities.³⁹

All these points suggest a need for future research into the practices of listeners who are not regular (“religious”) church-goers but who listen to digitally-mediated sermons. A digitally-mediated sermon is, in a sense, even more public than a sermon held in a local church due to the nature of digital media. The possibility exists to reach listeners who have never heard a sermon

³⁵ Gaarden & Lorensen, “Listeners as Authors in Preaching: Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives,” 28–45.

³⁶ Linn Sæbø Rystad, *Overestimated and underestimated*, 89–90.

³⁷ Ibid., 88. Gaarden also raises this issue in the Danish version of *The Third Room of Preaching*. Marianne Gaarden, *Prædiken som det tredje rum*, København: Anis, 2015.

³⁸ Gaarden, *The Third Room of Preaching*, 55–106.

³⁹ Ilona Nord, “Experiment with Freedom Every Day: Regarding the Virtual Dimension of Homiletics,” *Homiletic* 36, no. 2 (2011), 31–37.

before. Because of this, digitally-mediated sermons are sometimes thought to have missional potential. But will sermons fill a missional purpose if the listeners do not know to what ends they are listening? Or will they—as Gaarden and Nord suggest—still know what to do, since they have already been taught by previous experiences of digital spaces to “imagine God’s possibilities”?

As I have shown, listeners’ statements about the ends of listening also included strong opinions on what they thought were the wrong ends: being a spectator and being entertained. The question then arises: why are these ends unacceptable?

I would argue that a contributing reason for the negative view of being a spectator stems from the ideals of interaction and participation that permeate both digital culture and Swedish Protestant churches.⁴⁰ As for the negative view of entertainment, Katrin Kusmierz offers a clue in her discussion on digitally-mediated preaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Kusmierz, the fear of entertainment stems from a (Reformed/Protestant) ideal that content is the thing that matters most and that preachers should avoid anything that might distract from that.⁴¹

Kusmierz identifies a recurring theme in debates on online preaching: the fear that preachers will succumb to the shorter, hyperactive style of new media to attract listeners and in the process become “just entertainment.” By taking on a listener’s perspective, Kusmierz problematizes this idea. Drawing on Albrecht Grözinger and Harald Schroter-Wittke, she asks whether it might not in fact be a good thing if preaching was entertainment. Of course, entertainment can be shallow, brutal, and mere distraction, but it can also be nutritive, offer sustenance, facilitate conversations between equals, and is often delectable. In her argument, Kusmierz identifies a paradox: when the content is the sole focus, the face-to-face sermon-from-the-pulpit often, and perhaps paradoxically, creates distance. On the other hand, online preaching creates intimacy and closeness that the onsite counterpart often lacks by means of a shorter format and more direct style of speech.⁴² Kusmierz’s argument points to how further inquiry into digitally-mediated listening practices could contribute to a discussion on homiletical ideals and paradigms.

As I have shown, materiality is an important part of the practice of listening to digitally-mediated sermons (or any sermon). They contribute to upholding familiar practices, and changes in material arrangements can lead to obstructed or even disrupted listening practices. Listeners themselves acknowledged the importance of material arrangements, including the church building. As I have shown in this study, material arrangements may also contribute to the creation of new practices. The material arrangements of digital technology, for example, allow listeners to listen to more sermons than they would otherwise be able to. In addition, digital mediation leads to the involvement of new material arrangements, for example, the kitchen table. In short: the “third room of preaching” clearly comes into being in relation to material arrangements, not just human activity. The involvement of material arrangements, both in the local and digital settings, would be an interesting field for further investigation—including a phenomenon that the listeners in this study only hinted at: how algorithms affect listening practices.

⁴⁰ Mannerfelt, Frida and & Roitto, Rikard, “Mellan rit och reklam del 2: Interaktion, synkronicitet och integritet i digitalt förmedlade förinspelade andakter,” in *Kyrka i digitala rum: Ett aktionsforskningsprojekt om församlingsliv online i Svenska kyrkan*, ed. Sara Garpe and Jonas Idestrom (Uppsala: enheten för forskning och analys, 2022), 71–73; Mannerfelt, “Old and New Habits,” 110–112.

⁴¹ Katrin Kusmierz, “Predigt als Unterhaltung 2.0,”

https://www.liturgik.unibe.ch/ueber_uns/liturgie_in_virtuellen_raeumen/index_ger.html [accessed 22.12.19]

⁴² Ibid.

Finally, this study has shown how digital technology led to the involvement of further new material arrangements: arrangements of everyday life. Depending on which activities listeners engaged in, these everyday arrangements could be experienced as both distractions and facilitators to listening. When listeners tried to copy their usual listening practices from church, the new material arrangements were seen as a distraction. But when listeners let go of their notion of “proper” listening practices and incorporated the everyday material arrangements into their experience, listening was facilitated. In light of these findings, I would argue for the need to rethink practices. While it may seem possible to copy-paste the sermon listening practices from the local church setting (such as sitting quietly in a pew) and still reach the same ends, perhaps there are ways to reach these ends by better cooperation with the new material arrangements in which digitally-mediated sermon listeners find themselves. The example of eating and drinking shows how fruitful that approach can be.

Summary

This study aimed to examine the practice of listening to digitally-mediated sermons and, since it has rarely been done before, suggest some areas in which this research might be further developed. The source material under consideration included 14 group interviews with 29 listeners from Protestant congregations in the south of Sweden conducted in the spring of 2021, one year into the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent digital transition of the churches these listeners attended.

The interviews were analyzed with questions inspired by Theodore Schatzki’s practice theory in relation to the elements that practices consist of—activities, material arrangements, and ends—as well as any changes to these elements.

I found that the listeners could reach the desired ends of the practice of sermon listening since the digitally-mediated practices were “mostly the same.” However, there were slight differences due to changes in material arrangements that impacted the communal aspect of the listening practice. To most listeners, the differences interfered with their listening practices and put them at risk of engaging in the practice to the wrong ends: entertainment and spectatorship. For some, the differences even led to a breakdown of listening practices. However, new material arrangements could also lead to new listening practices. These new practices related both to the material arrangements of digital technology, but also to everyday material arrangements such as the kitchen table which inspired the listeners to include eating and drinking as part of their listening practices.

Finally, I discussed the results in light of recent homiletical research on the practice of listening to sermons and argued that: a) material arrangements play a pivotal part in listening practices; b) listening practices may be affected positively by the spatial experiences of digital mediation; c) the differences that obstructed and disrupted the listening practice were due to changes in material arrangements that affected the communal aspect of listening; d) the importance of knowing the ends of the listening practice raises questions about listeners who might not know the proper ends and points to the importance of learning them—challenging homiletical ideals about the ends of listening; and e) the need to rethink listening practices in relation to new material arrangements, instead of simply trying to copy the listening practices adopted from the material arrangements in the church building.