

CRISTINA NISTOR

RAREȘ BEURAN

EXPLORING MEDIA AND RELIGION –  
WITH A STUDY ON PROFESSIONAL MEDIA PRACTICES

**Cristina Nistor**

Babes-Bolyai University, Journalism Department, Faculty of Political,  
Administrative and Communication Sciences, Cluj, Romania.

**Email:** cnistor@fspac.ro

**Rareș Beuran**

Babes-Bolyai University, Journalism Department, Faculty of Political,  
Administrative and Communication Sciences, Cluj, Romania.

**Email:** beuran@fspac.ro

**Abstract:** The article focuses on how media and religion relate, investigating the specific professional practices of media reporting on religion. Journalism is objective, while religion is subjective – however, scholars agree that today it is difficult to imagine religion isolated from the relation with media. Therefore, the media coverage of religion, that includes identifying the proper approaches to objectively frame subjective topics, becomes a challenge. The paper provides a theoretical background on the main characteristics of the media industry and the models of journalism, good professional practices in reporting on religion, along with a brief overview at the situation of religious media content in worldwide media institutions and in Romania. Finally, a study on professional practices in local media was conducted, investigating how both mainstream and religious (niche) media journalists cover religious topics. Questions addressed by this paper refer to the principles of good reporting on religion, to the specific interaction between the Church and the media since more and more indicate media as source of knowledge for religion, and, finally, to the way media and religion are handling together the continuous challenges imposed by the fast technological progress in worldwide media communication.

**Key Words:** media coverage of religion, models of journalism, media functions, professional practices in media

## Introduction

For decades, when asked about institutions they trust, millions of people all over the world have mentioned the Church.<sup>1</sup> Also, today about one of every six people has no religious affiliation, according to a global study conducted by the Pew Research Center<sup>2</sup>; meaning that the “unaffiliated”, as referred to in the study, are the third largest group in the world, with 16 percent of the global population, about equal to Catholics, according to the same source. But, in the same time, media have the largest audiences worldwide, and more and more indicate media as source of knowledge for religion; while the online information and technologies (websites, blogs, social networks and more) are creating a real revolution in communication.

Pope Francis during his meeting with representatives of the media from 81 countries, shortly after his inauguration at Vatican declared that “The role of the mass media has expanded immensely in these years, so much so that they are an essential means of informing the world about the events of contemporary history. Historical events almost always demand a nuanced interpretation which at times can also take into account the dimension of faith. Working as a journalist calls for careful preparation, sensitivity and experience, like so many other professions, but it also demands a particular concern for what is true, good and beautiful. This is something which we have in common, since the Church exists to communicate precisely this: Truth, Goodness and Beauty ‘in person’”.<sup>3</sup>

In this framework, which is the current relation of media and religion? How does it work? Which institution influences the other one?

## Methodology

After presenting some general theoretical considerations on the relation of media and religion, the study includes an overview of the information provided by available different surveys previously conducted, plus the results of a structured interview applied to local Romanian journalists, working in different media institutions, with the aim to identify professional media practices in relation with religious stories.

## Theoretical background

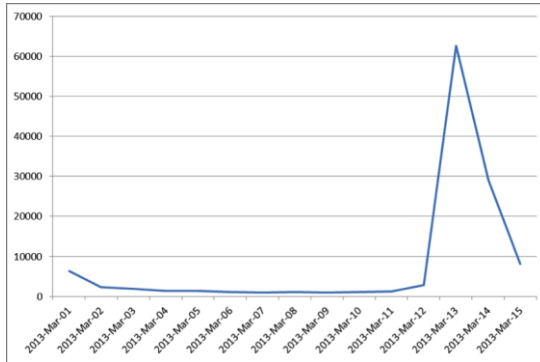
### Media and Religion – a general overview

Journalism is objective, while religion is subjective – therefore media coverage of religion becomes a challenge.

Countless has been written about media and even more about religion, and today *religion and media* are being studied all together. The Center for Religion and Media from New York University, USA, is such an example. According to the center mission, in the 21st century, religion is difficult to imagine detached from the dizzying array of media that amplify and circulate its ideas and practices.<sup>4</sup>

Years ago, Karl Barth, the Swiss Reformed theologian, said “hold the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other, and read both! But interpret newspapers from your Bible.” A *Time Magazine* article, published on May 31, 1963, mentions some of Barth’s considerations upon journalism: “newspapers are so important that ‘I always pray for the sick, the poor, journalists, authorities of the state and the church - in that order. Journalists construct public opinion. They hold terribly important positions. Nevertheless, a theologian should never be formed by the world around him - either East or West. He should make his vocation to show both East and West that they can live without a clash. Where the peace of God is proclaimed, there is peace on earth is implicit.”<sup>5</sup>

In an article titled “Religion and Media”, Rev. Carlos A. Valle, who served as World Association for Christian Communication’s General Secretary 1986-2001, comments upon “the pluralist character of modern society; social mobility and geography give rise to conglomerates of cultural, ethnic and religious diversity.”<sup>6</sup> Mentioning Barth’s recommendation about “holding the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other”, Rev. Carlos A. Valle asks “but what newspaper?” in this way introducing the question on the quality and the truth of the news provided by some media. Alongside, he mentions the main difference between public media and the commercial ones – “in public service the supreme criterion is the presence of society and its institutions and respect for religious and cultural traditions, while in private service the objective is to reach the largest audience in order to obtain the greatest profit.” Regarding the relation between religion and media, Rev. Valle believes that generally churches well received media, although there were certain fears. Therefore, first, “churches tried to reduce the media to being instruments at their service; then, they considered themselves the only ones fit to teach their correct use; and, finally, they had a marked distrust of the audience, which had to be protected, directed and controlled.” A recent example of how the Church uses media, including social media, is the well-known Vatican’s tweet “HABEMUS PAPAM FRANCISCUM” (“We have Pope Francis) on the day of the election of the new Pope in 2013. The message was retweeted 25,000 times within 10 minutes and a further 38,000 times within the next few hours.<sup>7</sup>



**Source:** <http://mappingonlinepublics.net/> Engagement with @pontifex account over time

In 2008, in *Media and Religion. A White Paper from The Center for Media, Religion, and Culture*, from University of Colorado at Boulder, Stewart M. Hoover considers that media interact with religion in ways that are changing both the media and religion.<sup>8</sup> Hoover believes that ever since Kennedy assassination in 1963, Americans were assuming that mourn and related ceremonies would be experienced through television. Therefore, according to Hoover, by September 11, both the media and their audiences were well prepared for television to become a kind of civil religious space that could draw in both national and international audiences and participants. Indeed, the attacks from September 11 made a change in media coverage of news – suddenly, print and audio-visual media worldwide have started to consider international affairs and religion more significant in their daily journalistic content. Finally, Hoover mentions that scholars should pay attention to “something new that is emerging – a new religious media culture or a new mediated religious culture.”

The mass culture that media created “is that of a reality that contains, as default dimension, the new forms of religiosity whose possibility of emergence is facilitated by a new way of relating to transcendence”, explains Romanian author Sandu Frunză while defining the way communication constructs reality.<sup>9</sup> When exploring the new configuration of the public space and the minimal ethics in the society built on communication, Frunză refers to the double phenomenon caused by global culture – he considers that “on the one hand, cultural pluralism has brought a sort of revitalization of values that direct individuals on the path of the need to preserve self-identity and a type of rethinking of global standards according to personal expectations.”<sup>10</sup> In the same study, Frunză explains that the result of this is the “concession of absolute values to certain principles of the new global context.” On the other hand, the author explicates that the global context has generated global ethics.

Returning to Hoover’s White Paper, there are three dimensions to the challenge for media professionals when covering religion:

- “an increasing need for sophisticated understandings and interpretations of what religions are on their own term;
- a need to understand and interpret the ways that religion interacts with other dimensions of social, political, and cultural life;
- and, finally, a broader understanding is needed of how religion and media influence each other today”<sup>11</sup>.

Referring to journalism practices, “the main obstacles to good reporting are the poor financial state of the media, overloading of reporters, lack of time, lack of knowledge, and lack of in-house training”, according to “Reporting Ethnicity and Religion” study on media coverage of ethnicity and religion, conducted in nine EU countries.<sup>12</sup> The results of the mentioned study also indicate that “the educational background of journalists covering religion and ethnicity appears higher than the educational background of the general body of journalists”. Finally, the “Reporting Ethnicity and Religion” study on media coverage of ethnicity and religion concludes that in addition when it comes to covering religious issues, “the principles of good reporting are accuracy, fairness, objectivity and balance”<sup>13</sup>.

Finally, in “Amusing Ourselves to Death”, Neil Postman explains that there are several characteristics of television that converge to make authentic religious experience impossible; the screen is so saturated with our memories of profane events, so deeply associated with the commercial and entertainment worlds that it is difficult for it to be recreated as a frame for sacred events.<sup>14</sup> The main message of the screen itself is a continual promise of entertainment, according to Neil Postman, while the spectacle we find in true religions has as its purpose enchantment, not entertainment; the distinction is critical, he considers. In a recent study on political communication and the media space of religious experience, Sandu Frunză explains how emotional tension is eliminated while consuming a political show broadcasted on TV. Further, the author considers that the situation is the same when watching a religious service on TV – ultimately, “what is missing is the emotion of participation, even if the initiation mystery may be the same”<sup>15</sup>, according to Frunză.

## Considerations on Media Industry

For a better understanding of the news industry, a short look upon the main functions of media could be of interest. Many researchers have argued different functions and effects of media, but generally they focused on the following as being the most significant. The informative function is considered to be the most important one, as the majority of the audiences indicate that the main reason for consuming media is to get informed. Literature also refers to the media function of education – both directly, through programs like learning a foreign language etc, or mainly

indirectly, through documentaries, talk-shows and interviews with specialists in different fields and so on. Also, another important function of media is the entertainment – audiences have the permanent possibility, usually for cheap costs, to disconnect from the daily problems and relax by consuming media entertainment programs. Another function is the one of interpretation – media provides in-depth explanations, correlations between facts and specialists' comments on various topics of interest for the audiences. Other functions relate to the idea of social cohesion and linkage. Millions of viewers around the world could connect to the same story that is being broadcasted (such as international sports, political and cultural events or different crisis situations) – religious ceremonies transmitted from Vatican, for example, always have millions of viewers and listeners around the globe.

In recent years the media have experienced a continuous development and progress through technology and digitization which caused large and rapid changes in production, organization, development, distribution and consumption of media. Changes are visible in the editorial work, so there is almost no media project that have not developed online multimedia content: text, image, sound, photographs, computer graphics, etc. All these changes affect the audience's profile because online distribution allows consumption regardless of geographic location. When looking at the new communication technologies and their possible impact towards the relation of media and religion, we could go back to Neil Postman's remark from 1985 – it is naive to suppose that something that has been expressed in one form can be expressed in another without significantly changing its meaning, texture or value.

One of the most relevant effects of media communication is building the public agenda. Researchers have developed a set of steps taken in the construction of the press public agenda:

- „press highlights some events or activities and make them public;
- to capture attention, different problems require different types and amounts of media approach;
- creating the agenda is accelerated when well-known and credible personalities begin to speak openly about an issue.”<sup>16</sup>

The profile of the target audience and the program format are decided by market surveys conducted by specialized firms. Also, organizing and launching such a project media (radio, TV or publication) involve very substantial budgets.<sup>17</sup> Results and information obtained from market surveys carried out are very important in terms of editorial organization, scale development program, the general format, the team etc.

Theories about changes in the media system draw attention to issues such as how modern technologies, and new releases affecting learning – nowadays library books can be read and even browsed on the computer or

on different tablets that replace conventional text formats containing media and photo slide shows, video and audio inserts, computer graphics, with text. Therefore, it is fast, convenient and relatively inexpensive.<sup>18</sup>

### Models of Journalism

In the International Encyclopedia of Communication, Bamhurst and Owens define journalism as “a constellation of practices that have acquired special status within the large domain of communication through a long history that separated out news-sharing from its origins in interpersonal communication”.<sup>19</sup> Donsbach, citing Schudson and his 1978 *Discovering the News* analysis of the social history of the American Newspapers, also mentions that the industrialized society and the individual new needs of information (related to the job market, for example), “stimulated a neutral and factual reporting and eventually led to the professional norm of objective journalism”. Today journalism needs to sell in order to assure its financial sustainability on the media market. Therefore, as Donsbach mentions, journalistic identity is related to the idea of “selling a communication product that meets the expectations and tastes of the widest public or the best targeted segment”.<sup>20</sup>

	<b>Subjective Tradition Pursuing individual goals</b>	<b>Public Service Tradition Supplying valid information</b>	<b>Commercial Tradition Give the people what they want</b>
Goal	Self-actualization	Adaptation of individual to reality and functioning of society	Economic interests of owners
Dominant Relationship	Journalist-Authorities	Medium-Society	Media-Market/ Shareholders
Prototypes	John Milton	Joseph Pulitzer	Rupert Murdoch
Dominant Value	Subjectivity / Freedom of expression	Objectivity / Plurality	Economic success / shareholder value
Dominant Content	Opinions before facts	Facts before opinions	Whatever sells
Journalist’s Role	Individual writer	Professional	Employee

Model of the traditions of journalism (Wolfgang Donsbach, “Journalists and their professional identities” 2010, 41).

Wolfgang Donsbach identifies four major challenges that journalism is facing.<sup>21</sup> First, there is a declining audience for news about which the author believes that complies with a “declining interest in the news or what is called the civic duty to keep informed”. A second challenge stated by Donsbach is “the increasing market pressures impacting news decisions” – related to both the need to attract large audiences and the need to attract advertisers. A third challenge, according to Donsbach, refers to the “declining reputation of the profession” and finally to the challenge of “the loss of identity that the journalistic occupation is facing”. This last challenge is strongly related to the new communication technologies that provide access to communicate worldwide to everyone that wishes to do so. As an argument, the author also mentions a study conducted at Harvard University that indicates that “the audience of non-traditional news disseminators (such as news aggregators, bloggers, search engines, social networking sites etc) has grown considerably faster than the audience of the websites of traditional news outlets”.<sup>22</sup>

## Religion Sections of Worldwide Mainstream Media

Main media institutions worldwide have special sections dedicated to covering religion.

The New York Times has the “Religion and Belief Section” – with news about religion and belief, including commentary and archival articles published in the NYT, according to official description. Stories like “In China, Catholic Faith Meets an Atheist State”; “Russia: Orthodox Leader Condemns Feminism”; “Looking at the New Face of the Church” are some of the thousands of stories developed by the NYT.<sup>23</sup>

The Washington Post titles its section “On Faith” and it develops topics like “How Latinos are changing Christianity”; “Women challenge Orthodox practice at Israel’s Western Wall”; “How churches should address abuse” etc.<sup>24</sup>

BBC has a special platform called “BBC Religion & Ethics” developing topics such as “What is the role of a modern pope?”; “Religious views on abortion” and so on.<sup>25</sup>

International news agencies, like Reuters, have created special platforms with media content covering religious topics. Its “Faith World” section, covering religious news around the world, develops stories like “Orthodox Jewish revival opens up a market niche for Yiddish news”; “Twitter ordered to identify anti-Semitic tweeters in France”; “Finding harmony in music and Islam”; “Go forth and Tweet! Pope Benedict sees social networks as portals of truth”.<sup>26</sup>



## Media and Religion in Romania

According to 2013 official statistics of National Council for AudioVisual, in Romania there are 639 terrestrial and satellite radio transmission licences, and 351 for television, alongside more than 3.500 licenses for cable retransmission.<sup>27</sup>

The newest media consumption national survey, conducted by IRES (Institutul Român pentru Evaluare și Strategie) in 2011, for the National Audiovisual Council, indicates that about 83% out of Romanians watch TV programs on a daily basis, while their main goal is to obtain information.<sup>28</sup> According to the same measurements, only 5% of Romanian TV viewers consume religious programs daily, 25% say they watch once per week, while 33% declare that they never choose this type of program. When looking closer to the consumers' profile, viewers aged between 51 and over 65 watch more religious TV programs in comparison with the segment of audience aged between 18 and 51. Regarding the religious programs' audience, it is interesting to see that the more educated the audience, the lower the level of interest in this category of programs, as the cited national survey indicates. So, results of the mentioned document show that only 4,4% of the well-educated declare that they watch religious programs a few times per week, in comparison with the 19% of the less educated viewers.

A national study on the presence of cultural-religious content in radio and TV programs, in Romania, (conducted in 2010 for the National Audiovisual Council) shows that religious TV and radio programs play a major role in promoting religious content.<sup>29</sup> Radio Trinitas, Radio Voice of Hope, Radio Voice of Gospel and Radio Mary are the main important niche radio stations covering religion, while Radio Romania News and Radio Romania Cultural, radio stations that belong to the public national society of radio, also offer some religious programs, in smaller percentage in comparison with the niche ones – the mentioned analysis indicates. When it comes to television, TV stations like Trinitas TV, Alpha Omega TV, Hope TV, Credo TV and Light Channel TV are producing religious content. But, one conclusion of the cited analysis indicates that the rush for audience and, therefore, for incomes from advertising (which of course provide the financial sustainability of media projects), leads to promoting less quality content. In consequence, religious programs are to be found almost only in the religious niche TV offers – among 4.400 and 9.000 minutes per week; in comparison, number one TV station in Romania (in terms of audience during the last decade), PRO TV, has zero minutes of religious program, while TVR 1 (the national public station from Romania) has around 140 minutes of religious programs per week, as concluded by the national analysis on cultural and religious media content.

Over 80% of Romanians, regardless of religious denomination, say that religion is important and very important in their lives, according to

new data revealed by Religion and religious behavior research, conducted by the Soros Foundation Romania. Creationism, miracles and divine truth are beliefs shared by more than half of Romanian, but the degree of religious tolerance is growing: 75% of Romanians believe that those who do not go to church can also be faithful and, over 70% believe that every religion is right in its own way.<sup>30</sup> Previous research conducted on religiosity and values in Romania show that religious beliefs are widely shared and praying is a common practice. In spite of the fact that church attendance is rather low, Romanians see Church as “having the role to solve almost every type of problems people can have.”<sup>31</sup> Referring to religious affiliation and social action in the public space, authors Frunză and Hosu, consider that religious institutions are important players in the public space including media and politics.<sup>32</sup> Other researchers consider that “Romanian people still come to Church because they are more of a believers and also they believe that the national Church, is in fact, the true keeper of faith.”<sup>33</sup>

But, in spite of all these figures, in January 2013, the National Audiovisual Council decided to withdraw all three broadcasters with religious profile (Trinitas TV, Hope TV and Alpha and Omega TV) from the "must carry" list of cable operators, decision based on audience measurements. Media NGO's reacted – Ioana Avădani, executive director at the Independent Journalism Center, says in an editorial published in the daily *Monitorul de Botoșani* that these TV stations were especially serving elder people for whom going to church was difficult.<sup>34</sup>

## Study of Professional Practices in Local Media

Based on the previous theoretical framework, with the aim to explore local professional journalism practices we interviewed a number of six Romanian journalists, who coordinate different local editorial desks or media productions, in order to verify the approach when it comes to religion topics. The sample includes experienced journalists working both in mainstream media (with an average professional media experience of more than fifteen years), plus a news desk coordinator of a religious radio station with expertise in religious journalism. The interviewed journalists work at local or regional TV and radio stations, print and online media, based in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. All respondents have university studies. Their educational background varies from sociology, political sciences to journalism and communication. Additionally, almost all of them have attended media related training programs. Information provided by interviewed journalists is presented below each question.

Q1. What kind of religious story is your news desk covering? Provide examples.

Among the religious stories covered by media in the beginning of 2013, the TV journalist that we interviewed mentioned the “election of the New Pope at Vatican”. The journalist from the newspaper (with more than 17 years of media experience) explained that there are two main categories of religious topics: the religious holidays and traditions (which are planned stories) and the social related topics (such as activities of religious foundations). Besides, the newspaper that he coordinates has a dedicated weekly page only for religious content – this time, the stories are signed by Church affiliated. Other religious stories mentioned by the online interviewed journalist are related to different religious celebrations such as Christmas or Easter. The news agency journalist also refers to the different pilgrimages that he covers. The journalist from the religious radio station mentions that “their news desk covers everything related to the administration of the Church, along with in-depth religious approach of the issues from mainstream media daily agenda”.

Q2. Which are the main sources used for developing a religious story?

When it comes to sources, all journalists that we interviewed mentioned “the official PR offices of the religious institutions, Church’s press releases”, explaining that they need to go directly to the main source, since the topic is highly sensitive. The journalist from the religious radio station mentions that “they take part directly to religious events (such as covering a ceremony from a monastery)”.

Q3. Which is the educational background of the journalist that covers religion in your news desk?

Answers show that although all interviewed journalists hold university degrees (BA, MA or PhD candidates), none of the mainstream media journalists that cover religious stories has any special training in the field. They consider the field “not as difficult as justice or finance, but rather closer to social”. Of course, the exception comes from the niche religious radio station where almost all employees have prior religious educational studies (BA, MA or PhD) and some of them also graduated media and communication university programs.

Q4. Which are the main challenges faced while covering a religious story?

The main challenge mentioned by interviewed journalists is communicating with specialists in the field, since on the one hand when media wants to cover special events (like the Holy Night of Easter) all priests are ...working; and, on the other hand before answering any question from media, priests need official approvals from the Church Press Office. The journalist from the news agency adds that the biggest challenge is the very strict religious language – as reporter that covers religious topics, one needs to know precisely all the linguistic differences, Church structure etc. Also, he mentions that a wider transparency of the Church would be necessary for stories that concern the use of financial funds (such as construction of churches). It was interesting for the authors

to notice that the religious journalist also mentioned the priests' reticence when communicating to media – he assumes that priests are not used to the idea of promoting their Church and its activities.

Q5. In what type of other stories do you also cover the religious angle?

All journalists mentioned that religious angles are usually related to social stories such as debates on abortion, legalization of prostitution, gay marriages or even on topics about national identity.

Q6. Which are the main ethical norms that guide the religious stories developed by your news desk?

When it comes to professional ethics, the TV journalist says that it is extremely important to have knowledge about the religious history and life of the community – and he mentions the example of the multiethnic Transylvania. The journalist that works at the newspaper considers that when covering religion political correctness must be respected. The journalist from the news agency adds that religious stories are extremely sensitive – in-depth research and more attention is needed. The journalist from the religious radio station explains that his news desk is always presenting all sides and that all religious denominations involved have the right to express their position – conflict or non-conflict news.

Q7. Are new communication technologies influencing the practice of religious journalism or media coverage of religion?

Regarding new technologies more and more present in today communication, local journalists that have answered our questions strongly believe that they cause changes in both media coverage of religion and religion practices. Among the examples provided by them, we mention the news websites developed by Churches, the use of social networks for disseminating religious content etc. The radio journalist (who mentions that he is also in charge with the online radio content) says that the Facebook account of the radio station is a very useful communication tool when it comes to distribute information among the young groups of audiences. The Pope's Twitter account was mentioned by almost all journalists – Vatican targets younger segments by permanently adapting its communication strategies to the progress in the media communication field.

## Conclusions

The study explored aspects of the complex relation of media and religion, providing a theoretical background for media industry, along with various earlier studies conducted on media and religion – on reporting on media and ethnicity, on professional practices in media and more. Further on, the authors explored the situation of religious media content in Romania and finally conducted interviews with local journalists investigating media professional practices when covering religion.

Our analysis indicates that due to the impressive development of media communication, both traditional and online, today religion and media can not be approached detached. Although, as detailed in the theoretical background of the paper, there are characteristics of television that converge to make authentic religious experience impossible, mainly referring to entertainment and commercial, as indicated by Neil Postman, millions of religious people around the world practice the mediatized religion.

Consequently, further questions may be formulated. Will religious journalism be “re-shaped” due to the online communication? Will new media and new communication technologies influence radically the religious practices? Will the Church permanently bring up-to-date its communication strategies in the digital epoch? And to what extent are the religious niche media projects (print, online or audio-visual media content) financially sustainable on the media market?

## Notes

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