

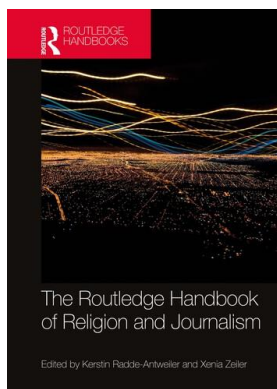
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(DE-)DIFFERENTIATION AND RELIGION IN DIGITAL NEWS

Johanna M. Sumiala

Introduction: theorizing differentiation

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines *differentiation* as a development “from the one to the many, the simple to the complex, or the homogeneous to the heterogeneous” (Merriam-Webster 2019). In social theory, differentiation is typically connected with the process of modernization in which different spheres of society become separated (Giddens 1992, 633–634). In other words, modern society involves increased structural specialization and growing independence among societal spheres, through which religion, economics, politics and culture are seen as separate and independent spheres of modern society (Alexander and Colomy 1990, Juteau 2003, 4). With respect to the study of religion, the idea of differentiation has radical consequences, as differentiation considers religion to not only be a separate category of society but also a category that belongs to the private domain rather than the public sphere (see also Lövheim 2017, Sumiala 2017). The idea of differentiation in modern society is thus intimately connected with the process of secularization, a decrease in the role of religion in society and a normative idea of the secular public sphere free from religious influences (Habermas 1989, Casanova 1994).

The idea of differentiation has also left its mark in the study of modern journalistic media, which is typically called mass media (e.g., Morley 2007). Newspapers are a common example of this. Throughout the history of print media (Nerone 2015), newspapers have been perceived as a modern institution for discussing and debating different spheres of society across diverse topics (e.g., foreign news, domestic news, economics) (see also Sumiala et al. 2017). Thus, differentiation in newspapers (as well as elsewhere in mainstream news media) is an important concept under which different news topics are seen according to news criteria and how those news topics shape the idea of the public sphere (Nerone 2015).

While the concept of differentiation is considered highly influential in both social theory and media theory, it has also faced explicit criticism. The idea of separating social reality into different spheres (in news media and in society) has been critiqued for its tendency to universalize certain European historical developments and generalize these processes into a universal and normative theory of the modernization and secularization of society (Meyer and Moors 2006). Another critique is based on the theory’s inability to recognize the hybrid nature of social and cultural phenomena (belonging to and crossing over different spheres).

In his book *We Have Never Been Modern*, Bruno Latour describes this modern compulsion to compartmentalize life as follows:

Headings like Economy, Politics, Science, Books, Culture, Religion and Local Events remain in place as if there were nothing odd going on. The smallest AIDS virus takes you from sex to the unconscious, then to Africa, tissue cultures, DNA and San Francisco, but the analysts, thinkers, journalists and decision-makers will slice the delicate network traced by the virus for you into tidy compartments where you will find only science, only economy, only social phenomena, only local news, only sentiment, only sex.

(Latour 1993, 2)

In the study of news media, I argue that this type of classification has also resulted in a failure to recognize the complex and many-sided ways in which religion is, in fact, embedded in the culture, politics and economics that surround us (Sumiala et al. 2017).

Perhaps the most profound critique of differentiation involves the changes brought about by the digitalization of the media environment (Berglez 2013). With the advent of the Internet, media scholars have begun to rethink the idea of differentiation and related media logic in new ways. One key element here involves the blurring of categories and related hierarchies across the different actors (journalists and amateur media users) and platforms (professional news media and social media) capable of making and sharing news today. Research on the remediation, convergence and hybridization of digital communication all point in this direction. Many studies have also argued that while the media environment has become more and more diverse due to the Internet and social media-related news-making, professional news journalism has started to lose some of its power as a gatekeeper and agenda setter in today's digital public sphere (e.g., Jenkins 2006, Meikle and Sherman 2012, Meikle 2016, Friedrichsen and Kamalipour 2017). Additionally, emerging concerns about the reliability of news making have been voiced, as new social media actors have entered the field of news-making and news sharing (Sumiala and Tikka 2013).

One example of the changing dynamics in the public sphere and related institutional actors was provided by anthropologists Dale Eickelman and Jon Anderson (1999). They argue for the relevance of new emerging Muslim publics (and related actors) in the digital sphere. They discuss a process that is called de-differentiation (see also Herbert 2011). In this process, not only are conventional ideas of differentiation into independent sections in professional news media challenged, but the power relationship between the state and its control over institutional journalism is also questioned. The authors describe this change and its implications in the larger cultural and societal context as follows:

“Situated outside formal state control, this distinctly Muslim public sphere exists at the intersections of religious, political, and social life. Facilitated by the proliferation of media in the modern world, the Muslim public can challenge or limit state and conventional religious authorities and contribute to the creation of civil society. With access to contemporary forms of communication that range from the press and broadcast media to fax machines and audio- and videocassettes...to the Internet, Muslims, like members of Christian coalitions, Hindu revivalists (Juergensmeyer 1993), Jewish activists, Sikh militants and protagonists of Asian and African values, have more rapid and flexible ways of building and sustaining contact with constituencies than was available in earlier

decades. The asymmetries of the earlier mass media revolution are being reversed by new media in new hands. This combination of new media and new contributors to religious and political debates fosters an awareness on the part of all actors of the diverse ways in which Islam and Islamic values can be created and feeds into new sense of a public space that is discursive, performative, and participate, and not confined to formal institutions recognized by state authorities.

(Eickelman and Anderson 1999, 1–2)

Eickelman and Anderson's take on theorizing these new publics is rather optimistic. Their postulation concerning emerging new voices and related publics is certainly worth acknowledging. However, more recent research on state control of Internet communication in societies such as China or Turkey, as well as such developments as hate speech, echo chambers, cyber propaganda, fake news and trolling in the USA and the UK, which are often discussed under the umbrella concept of *post-truth*, have begun to seriously question such optimistic interpretations of the Internet's de-differentiating and liberating potentiality (Davis 2017, Phillips and Milner 2017). These types of critical studies allow religion and news journalism scholars to better recognize ongoing tensions among the articulations of different voices on religious issues, their truth-value, and the contradictory ways such articulations can be used to serve various religious and political ambitions and objectives in today's digital public sphere.

Religion as a minor topic in the news

In order to analyze in more detail the ways in which differentiation as a theory, idea and process has shaped the study of religion and news in the past, two key developments should be identified. The first pertains to the perception of religion as a minor topic, namely in Western news media. The second points to the growing presence of Islam (compared to other religions) as a topic in Western news journalism. During the last 30 years, many studies that discussed the role and place of religion in contemporary, secular Western news media and related journalism had considered religion to be unimportant topic for modern secular news (Hoover 1998). Simply, religion was not *hard news*, but a *soft story* (see Gower and Mitchell 2012, 1). This argument aligns with the idea of differentiation discussed above. As an issue and a topic categorized in modern secular society as a private matter, religion needs not be given notable attention as a news subject in the public sphere. It can be argued that the tendency of minimizing religion as a news subject is the most explicit example of differentiation in the study of religion and news media.

However, the idea of differentiation influences not only the place of religion in news media and journalism but also the ways in which religion is covered and reported in the news when it *is* given attention. As a scholar of religion and news, Diane Winston (2012, 5) reminds us that “news is current and consequential information on matters that affect and interest its consumers.” The defining features of news criteria – impact, timeliness, prominence, proximity, bizarreness, conflict and currency – are indirectly related to differentiation. Thus, if and when religion makes the news in secular media, it must meet these criteria. This explicitly influences the conditions under which religion makes news (when it does!) in secular news media (Winston 2012, 5). In accordance with the vocabulary of Jolyon Mitchell (2012, 20), we may call this perspective on differentiation a *journalist-centered approach*, as it focuses on the conditions of news production and when and how religion can be considered a suitable topic for secular news.

Winston (2012) offers further explanations for the workings of secular news journalism and its impact on the presence of religion in the news. According to Winston (2012, 14), news outlets often define religion in rather conventional and institutional terms. For example, Judaism is perceived as a religion in the news, but extreme suffering is not, though they both share aspects of community, ritual and transcendence (Winston 2012). News on religion, thus, has a tendency to focus on prominent religious institutions (e.g., large churches) and powerful people (e.g., the pope and the Dalai Lama) instead of small, marginal religious groups and their followers. This is, of course, with the exception of violent religious movements and curiosities concerning religious practices considered bizarre, such as polygamy in the Mormon religion or celebrity-driven scandals in Scientology, which also make headlines in secular news media.

Taking Winston's (2012, 14) argument a bit further, news criteria and the very journalistic practice of news gathering can be perceived as implicitly or explicitly embedded in the idea of differentiation and can be thought to openly shape what is publicly considered *religion* in the news. In other words, decisions about sourcing, reporting and framing stories on religion do much more than simply convey information about the religion in question. Furthermore, the categorization and mainstreaming of certain issues, ideas and personalities as religious while marginalizing, ignoring or even silencing others powerfully influences what is perceived as religion and religious and what the place and role of religion should be in any given social context (Winston 2012, 14).

The Islamification of religion in the news

The journalistic convention to simultaneously view religion as a private matter but also show interest in religion when it meets news criteria (e.g., when it affects society in a way that is considered curious, unexpected or controversial) has had profound implications for the public presence of religion in Western news media. Many scholars of religion, news and journalism (Taira, Knott and Poole 2012, Lundby et al. 2017, Sumiala et al. 2017) argue that, in recent decades, this tendency has most explicitly increased the presence of Islam as a news topic in Western news media. This phenomenon has been described as the *Islamification* of religion in the news (Sumiala 2017, 361–365) and can be considered yet another consequence of differentiation. To explain the reasons for the *Islamification* of news on religion, scholars have referred to a variety of media-related processes. One of these processes has to do with the volume of news pertaining to religion. Recent empirical studies have shown that in many European news media sources, more space in journalism has been given to Islam than Christianity, the most commonly practiced religion in Europe (e.g., Kassaye, Ashur and Heelsum 2016, Sumiala et al. 2017). Another aspect has to do with the framework applied to news regarding Islam. Islam in the news is frequently associated with conflict, violence and controversy. This enforces the idea of Islam as a societal threat and a social problem (see also Hjelm 2011). Moreover, even when Islam is reported in the news for a reason other than violence and conflict, very little communication exists between different news sections (such as foreign news, domestic news and current affairs). This leads to a highly fragmented perception of religion (primarily Islam) in the news and, consequently, in society (Sumiala et al. 2017).

That being said, the space given to Islam in Western news media cannot be explained solely by the number of Muslims (a minority religion in the studied European countries, which include the UK, the Netherlands, Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Finland) or the number of victims of radical Islamists in these societies (Taira, Knott and Poole 2012, Kassaye, Ashur and Heelsum 2016, Lundby et al. 2017, Sumiala et al. 2017). Instead, to

establish empirical explanations (in terms of quantity), we must determine other factors to explain this recent phenomenon.

Knut Lundby and colleagues (2017, 440) argue that the strong inclination in Western societies to connect Islam with violence, conflict and controversy contributes to the politicization of Islam in the news (e.g., in Scandinavia) and, consequently, in society. In Lundby's view, the politicization of Islam and the mediatization of religion serve mutually reinforcing functions. While the politicization of Islam makes Islam more newsworthy and thus visible in the public sphere, the authors argue that the mediatization of religion involves the news media's construction of Islam as such a conflict-ridden topic that less attention is paid to the other dimensions of this religion (Lundby et al. 2017, 455). Thus, we may recognize *politics of repetition* in action in Islam-related news, which has become a self-enforcing concept in news media reports on religion (Sumiala et al. 2017, 414–436).

In addition, when we look at the issue of the *Islamification* of religion in the news from the perspective of religious institutions and actors, the journalistic tendency to emphasize exceptionality and conflict over everyday life is often critiqued as unjust among the religious public (see also Gower and Mitchell 2012). Religious actors feel that news media portrayals do not match how they see themselves (Taira, Knott and Poole 2012, 31). Although the goal of news journalism is not to develop portrayals that please a religion's advocates, it is problematic for journalism and its legacy if so-called *in-group* members do not even recognize religions in news reports as their own. This ongoing tension between journalistic and in-group perceptions of religion in the news is one of the topics under continuous debate between journalism and its religious audiences (Gower and Mitchell 2012).

In the next section of this chapter, I will examine more closely how religion, namely Islam, was constructed in a particular news event and how the idea of differentiation shaped the social construction of religion in the interplay between the online and social media news. I will provide a reading of the media material that demonstrates how certain social media actors were able to shape the news making and sharing of the Charlie Hebdo attacks and the related interpretation of Islam immediately after these attacks. This reading is based on empirical research of online (namely Western) news media and social media (namely Twitter, Facebook and YouTube) news coverage of the killings in the immediate aftermath of the massacre. Its purpose is to illustrate the significance of social media-related actors in influencing news making in professional news media and, eventually, the social construction of Islam in this violent, heavily mediatized event of global appeal (Sumiala et al. 2018).

Two important points need to be added here. First, in my discussion of journalism in news media, I refer mainly to what is called *online journalism* in that field (Golan and Mishol-Shauli 2018). Online journalism includes both professional online news media and social media. The taxonomy of the field (Benkler 2011) distinguishes among Internet editions of print newspapers and television networks (e.g., *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *CNN*, *the BBC* and *Aljazeera English*), non-profit media and information organizations (e.g., Wikileaks) and individual (or amateur) news producers in social media (e.g., Twitterers, YouTubers and bloggers). Second, my approach to religion follows Stewart Hoover's (2009) conception of religion as a process of meaning making. Hoover (2009, cited in Lövheim 2011, 154) maintains that we can only define what religion *is* by studying (in this case) how social media and professional news media producers and users construct religion in actual situations and practices. Thus, I do not wish to make any claims about the true essence of Islam, what it is or what it should be. Instead, I will attempt to analyze the ways in which Islam was constructed in the news in a particular case and what this type of construction may imply in the context of differentiation.

News on Islam after the Charlie Hebdo attacks

As a brief description of this newsworthy event, the Charlie Hebdo massacre was initiated by French–Algerian brothers Saïd and Chérif Kouachi. The attacks took place in Paris on Wednesday, 7 January 2015, when the perpetrators killed 12 people at the Charlie Hebdo news office. Afterward, the brothers claimed in public that their attack had been an act of a jihadist terrorism (Roy 2016, Kepel 2017). Their rationale for attacking Charlie Hebdo was the newspaper’s reputation as a publication of blasphemous motivations. The Kouachi brothers justified their actions by claiming to have been levying revenge in the name of the prophet Muhammad. In recent decades, Charlie Hebdo published several satirical pictures of the prophet Muhammad.

Although its journalistic policy had defenders, Charlie Hebdo was also known to have offended large Muslim publics in France and elsewhere in the world (Titley 2017, Sumiala et al. 2018). The attacks were followed by a massive, three-day police manhunt. This manhunt attracted considerable media attention, not only in national and international news media but also on social media, including Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. As the events unfolded, another perpetrator, Amedy Coulibaly, appeared on the news scene when he linked his assault of a kosher supermarket to the Kouachi brothers’ terrorist mission. The manhunt ended on 9 January when French police killed all three perpetrators following two deadly hostage situations.

During this time of intensive news coverage, international news media and social media published several news stories related to Islam. One of the underlying storylines had to do with Islam as a *bad religion*. The stories around *bad Islam* first condensed in the news narratives that surrounded the killing of police officer Ahmed Merabet, as well as other similar incidents (Sumiala et al. 2018). Another concept, which is associated with the *bad Islam* viewpoint, is called the *mediating Islam* framework. It, too, was first created within social media and then taken up by professional news media, travelling back and forth between the two.

In the remaining part of this chapter, I wish to discuss two empirical examples in which social media and ordinary media users played a key role in shaping both *bad Islam* and *mediating Islam* news frameworks in the attacks. I will also discuss how professional news media applied these frameworks in their news-making, again providing material for social media news circulation. Interestingly, in the creation of both frameworks, the role of an ordinary media user, Jordi Mir, became significant. Mir accidentally filmed the killing of a police officer, Ahmed Merabet, on his mobile phone and put the video into circulation on Facebook.

Bad Islam

Jordi Mir was an ordinary French citizen who lived in the same neighborhood as the Charlie Hebdo office. He happened to be working at home at the time of the attacks. Suddenly, he heard a loud noise coming from the street and looked out of the window to see what was happening. What he witnessed was the killing of a man on the street. Mir filmed the murder on his mobile phone and put the video – which he later interpreted to be a gut reaction – on Facebook. After some 15 minutes, Mir began to have second thoughts about publishing the video and removed it from his Facebook feed. However, the video had already gone viral (the video was first leaked to YouTube, Satter 2015), and

at that point, it became impossible for Mir to erase his video from international social media and professional news circulation. The video quickly became breaking news in news outlets such as *The New York Times*, *CNN*, *the BBC* and *The Guardian* and it was constantly referred to in the following days along with the news coverage of the Charlie Hebdo attacks and related stories.

In addition to the shock value, the video also provided one of the few pieces of authentic visual evidence of the attacks. It gave faces to the perpetrators and one of their victims and it also provided evidence to interpret and explain the nature of the violence as radical Islamist terrorism. The witnessing value of Mir's video in news circulation (both in social media and professional news media) became even greater since no other visual evidence was provided of the actual massacre at the Charlie Hebdo office. The video was described in professional news media such as *The Associated Press* as "shocking" and "sickening" (Sumiala et al. 2018, 79). Consequently, the *bad Islam* viewpoint began to emerge after the attacks, alongside the circulation of Mir's video.

As soon as the professional news media had established *bad Islam* as the reason for the violence, new news stories on the killers as radical Islamists began to emerge across different international news media platforms. One important journalistic story discussed news stories about the perpetrators and their path to radicalization as well as their assumed connections with such radical and organized terrorist groups as Al Qaeda. It was reported that the killers had grown up in poor suburban Paris in the margins of French society. They were described as *ghetto Muslims*, marginalized and poor. According to some news outlets, they had become radicalized jihadists because they wanted to belong and to have the identity of being people worth recognizing (Graham-Harrison 2015, Todd 2015).

Another journalistic story that kept the *bad religion* idea alive in professional news media was created regarding the polarized performances of solidarity between those *good*, westernized, liberal victims and *the bad*, religious killers (Titley 2017, 1–30). Again, the significance of social media became visible. The slogan and hashtag #jesuischarlie, first created by journalist Joachim Roncin, began to circulate on Twitter and was soon remediated to other social media and professional online news media platforms. As a result, #jesuischarlie became the most tweeted token in the history of Twitter (Sumiala et al. 2018). In a digital wave of solidarity, symbolic boundaries were created between those who supported Charlie Hebdo and the values it defended and those who refused (for a variety of reasons) to identify with the slogan *jesuischarlie* and what it stood for. One of the underlying news debates was articulated around secular versus religious (in this case, Muslim) values (see also Titley 2017). In the international news media coverage, these debates enforced boundaries between the so-called *us* – namely the secular West – and the so-called *them*, the *religious Orient*. The idea of *bad religion* was further enforced by international news media such as *CBS News*, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian* and *Aljazeera English* reports that covered demonstrations in such countries as Yemen, Pakistan and Chechnya in which people marched against those who showed solidarity for the Charlie Hebdo victims.

An additional element of *bad religion* came about in response to other stories connected to the supporters of the perpetrators. One of the hashtags that was given public visibility in the media was #jesuiskouachi. However, this hashtag was soon hijacked by Twitter users who wished to mock the killers and their supporters. Thus, while #jesuiskouachi kept circulating, its meaning(s) changed radically from idolizing the killers to shaming and disgracing them and their supporters: yet another way that Islam was framed as a *bad religion*.

When we interpret the news' idea of Islam as a *bad religion* through the lens of differentiation, we recognize a standard news logic on religion in action. As unexpected attacks of enormous symbolic value, the Charlie Hebdo attacks became breaking news. Islam as a *bad religion* provided an explanatory framework for the attacks, which was repeated across several news outlets and multiple stories. As global news, the idea of Islam as a *bad religion* rapidly spread from one media platform to the next. This progression resonated with the idea of differentiation among different media; however, at the same time, the elements of de-differentiation (Herbert 2011) were at play through the convergence of similar logic between different media platforms. The dissemination of Islam as a *bad religion* was shared by a multitude of platforms and actors, but it is important to understand that it was first triggered in social media.

Mediating Islam

The framing of Islam as a *bad religion*, though it was perhaps one of the most explicit, was not the only frame constructed by the news reports of the Charlie Hebdo attacks. Interestingly, Mir's video also played an important role in creating a more moderate framework to represent Islam in both social media and professional news media in association with the attacks. The victim in the video was a Muslim police officer, Ahmed Merabet. When the video of Merabet's killing went viral, social and news media were interested not only in the perpetrators but also the victim himself.

There were many aspects that social media and professional news media picked up on in making and sharing the news on Merabet. The most important element had to do with Merabet's Muslim background. The news media released to the public several facts about Merabet's life. It stated that he had grown up in Livry-Gargan in the northeastern suburbs of Paris and graduated from the local lycée in 1995. *Paris Match* (Lallement 2015) reported that Merabet's father, Kaddour, had migrated to France in 1955 and his mother, Houria, in 1962. Merabet was said to have fulfilled his responsibility as the family's eldest son after his father's death by looking after his mother and siblings. Like many other newspapers, *Le Figaro* (De Mareschal 2015) portrayed Merabet and his family as good, hard-working citizens. Merabet was praised as a devoted officer who worked hard to gain a promotion in the police force (Graham-Harrison 2015).

In many news stories published in newspapers like *The Guardian*, Merabet was portrayed as a hero: a well-assimilated Muslim citizen living in France who died defending French values. This story was confirmed by Merabet's family, who gave interviews on the incident in different news media. Their message was peace rather than violence. In the words of Malek, Ahmed's brother, who became a prominent public witness to his brother's character as a good Muslim and French citizen in international news media:

'My brother was Muslim and he was killed by two terrorists, by two false Muslims,' he said. 'Islam is a religion of peace and love. As far as my brother's death is concerned, it was a waste. He was very proud of the name Ahmed Merabet, proud to represent the police and of defending the values of the Republic—liberty, equality, fraternity.'

(Graham-Harrison 2015)

A tragic additional layer was brought to Merabet's story by his partner, Morgane Ahmad, who told *BBC News* (2015) that she had first learned about Merabet's death on television.

I was in a restaurant and a television was on [...] I didn't recognise him, I only saw the picture of a man on the pavement. I tried to call him, sent messages. I went back to work, and then his sister called me.

(BBC News 2015)

The family expressed in public their strong disapproval for publishing and circulating Merabet's death online, blaming Mir for his actions. Mir, again, had become a public celebrity and had given several interviews claiming that he regretted posting the video. Additionally, he publicly apologized to the Merabet family. All these different phases were carefully reported in professional international news media as reported by *Associated Press* (Satter 2015).

In addition to Merabet's family, his colleagues in the police force and French politicians, including President Hollande and Prime Minister Manuel Valls, publicly recognized Merabet and honored him for giving his life in the service of French society. Both Hollande and Valls praised Merabet as an exemplary Muslim and French citizen. In an official ceremony, Merabet was awarded the Légion d'Honneur, the highest order of recognition in France. In addition to giving public speeches in which they highlighted Merabet's exemplary actions, Hollande and Valls took an active part in the public mourning of Merabet. Hollande also paid a visit to Merabet's family in Seine-Saint-Denis, a symbolic act that also received attention from professional news media (e.g., *Le Parisien* 2015). Merabet's funeral also made the news in social media. On YouTube, several videos and related commentaries on this event can still be found. All in all, the news stories surrounding Merabet in both social and professional news media provided a framework that described Islam not as violent, but as a *mediating religion*, thus encouraging common understanding between the secular and religious perceptions of the event.

In addition to Merabet's story, other moderate views on Islam were given public visibility in the news coverage of the attacks. Several reports were made about ordinary Muslims living in France and elsewhere in Europe. In these stories, people who practiced Islam voiced their concerns about the polarization of public opinion, the rise of right-wing populist politics and the demonization of Islam and its followers as carriers of terrorism. In social media, many Muslims wished to publicly show their colors and claim that, while they did not wish to be Charlie (referring to the slogan #jesuischarlie), they also refused to be seen as terrorists. In this context, the slogan #jesuisahmed (referring to Ahmed Merabet) was used to portray Islam as a mediating religion that sought solidarity and peace instead of conflict and polarization between the different parties of the digital public sphere. One particularly influential tweet that circulated on different platforms of social media as well as professional news media said:

I am not Charlie, I am Ahmed the dead cop. Charlie ridiculed my faith and culture and I died defending his right to do so #JesuisAhmed.

(Sumiala et al. 2018, 84)

To put it briefly, when we look at Islam as a mediating religion through the lens of differentiation, we may recognize similar dynamics between the construction of the *bad religion* and the mediating religion ideas. Both were created through a complex network of communication across different media platforms and actors and both were initially triggered in social media. Only in the latter case did the differentiation of platforms and actors provide a new, contradictory framework to represent and discuss the role of Islam in the attacks. This suggests that we should view differentiation not as a deterministic process, but as a process that is:

- open to the creation of a variety of frameworks that depend on often rather unexpected and random dynamics triggered by the types of evidence available for circulation (such as Mir's video);
- activated by different types of media users and
- activated by both ordinary and professional news-making actors who may well aim to achieve divergent goals and proposals through their newsworthy actions.

Conclusion: rethinking differentiation in terms of religion in digital news

When we examine the news coverage of Islam in the Charlie Hebdo attacks and analyze it through the lens of differentiation, we can pinpoint at least three key aspects. First, the combination of differentiation (which has resulted in religion being a rare news topic) and news criteria (which focuses on unexpected violence) provides one explanation for why Islam has been given such a significant position in recent religion-based news in Western news media. Extreme violence – such as the Charlie Hebdo attacks – has the power to break through the structure of differentiation. The other side of the coin of this development is the heavy emphasis placed on the social construction of religion as a threat and problem in society such that religion (in this case, Islam) begins to equal violence in the public sphere.

Second, the Charlie Hebdo attacks demonstrated how changes in the media environment shape differentiation. We can recognize a trend in the pluralization of frameworks that discuss religion. Although the *bad religion* portrayal played a fairly visible role in the news reports on the Charlie Hebdo attacks, counter-voices were also articulated. The *mediating religion* framework, for instance, became particularly influential in bringing new voices to the news coverage of Islam in the attacks. The role of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube was central in this pluralization process pertaining to Islam. This can be explained by thinking of differentiation in terms of specialization not only in news media but also across different media, namely amateur media and professional news media (see also Allan and Thorsen 2014). Furthermore, instead of seeing differentiation among different media as a process of separation, we should also see it, perhaps even more so, as a process of creating new connections and intersections among different platforms and actors (see Meikle 2016).

Third, in the Charlie Hebdo case, differentiation brought about a Janus-faced dilemma. Both the pluralization (of news platforms, actors and frames) and the polarization of views connected with religion (e.g., religion being seen as a bad or mediating force in society) can exist simultaneously in the digital public sphere. Thus, what we can see here is a process of de-differentiation (Herbert 2011), in which news on religion, as well as the platforms and actors that circulate it, converge and remediate among one another, producing new types of hybrid connections and intersections that all shape the social construction of religion in the digital sphere (Meikle and Sherman 2012, Meikle 2016).

This shift in focus also raises important questions for future research. What happens to the truth-value of news on religion in this new de-differentiated and converged media environment (Jenkins 2006)? How can we judge the authenticity of amateur and vernacular actors who make and share news on religion (Chouliaraki 2015)? How should future research on religion in news address the issues of fake news and trolling? The ways in which these complex de-differentiation processes shape the position of religion in the news and the

broader relationship between religion and society is both a theoretical and empirical challenge to be addressed by future research on digital religion (Campbell 2012). As Katherine Fry puts it:

“Social networking and video sharing sites such as... Facebook and YouTube, no matter the level of accuracy, are prominent venues for information of all sorts, from the internationally consequential to the most personal. These sources are changing where and how some people are getting their news. They are also changing news.” (Fry 2008, 546)

Finally, if and when a shift occurs in the public presence of religion in the news in today's digital sphere, we must begin to seriously revise our theoretical ideas about secularization (see Habermas 2008) in the present de-differentiated digital condition.

Further readings

- Lundby, K., ed., 2018. *Contesting Religion. The Media Dynamics of Cultural Conflicts in Scandinavia*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
This book examines mediatization of conflicts related to religion as they play out in public broadcasting media and social media. Empirical focus is given to religion in Scandinavian media.
- Steensen, S. and Ahva, L., 2019. *Theories of Journalism in a Digital Age*. London and New York: Routledge.
The book discusses new ways of theorizing journalism by (re-)thinking such key concepts in journalism theory as de-differentiation, circulation and news networks in a digital age.

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