

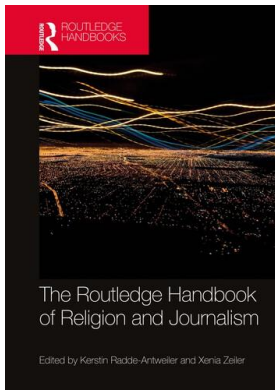
This article was downloaded by: 10.3.97.143

On: 31 May 2023

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



The Routledge Handbook of Religion and Journalism

Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, Xenia Zeiler

Reporting refugees

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203731420-4>

Jolyon Mitchell, Sara Afshari

Published online on: 30 Oct 2020

How to cite :- Jolyon Mitchell, Sara Afshari. 30 Oct 2020, *Reporting refugees from:* The Routledge Handbook of Religion and Journalism Routledge

Accessed on: 31 May 2023

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203731420-4>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: <https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms>

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

2

REPORTING REFUGEES

The theory and practice of developing
journalistic religious literacy*Jolyon Mitchell and Sara Afshari***Introduction**

Asal was born just 47 minutes into 2018, so she was named “Vienna’s New Year Baby of the Year” (Eddy 2018). She was born to refugee Muslim parents, Naime and Alper Tamga. Following local popular tradition in certain parts of Austria, Asel’s photo with her proud parents was published on their New Year Baby’s Facebook page. This also attracted the attention of local media. Instead of good wishes, however, the newborn Asal and her family were greeted with a wave of racist comments, vicious posts and online polemical hate speech. One example out of dozens reflects a repeated refrain: “Deport the scum immediately” (Young-Powell 2018). As a result of such abuse their Facebook page was taken down. Several English language newspapers, such as *The New York Times*, *The Telegraph* and *The Daily Mail*, reported these digital attacks. In Britain, *The Telegraph* also highlighted how the Austrian President was forced to intervene (Young-Powell 2018). Their religion (Islam) and the fact that they were refugees were described as the main causes of this digital vitriol. Several news reports presented the voices and concerns of anti-migrants, especially far-right groups, alongside those who were arguing for the importance of welcoming migrants. The voices of refugees themselves were completely left out. They were instead commonly presented as outsiders and even dangerous intruders.

This example of reporting about anti-refugee rhetoric overlooks a far larger challenge. In 2018, there were over 65 million people forcibly displaced worldwide, including over 22 million refugees from the Middle East and North Africa.¹ Many of these people, hoping for sanctuary, a new start and a new home, have experienced far from warm welcomes in countries that they have travelled through or arrived in. At the same time, there are also around 10 million stateless people, who are “denied a nationality and access to basic rights such as education, healthcare, employment and freedom of movement” (UNHCR 2018). Some 55% of refugees come from three countries: Syria (5.5 million), Afghanistan (2.5 million) and South Sudan (1.4 million) (UNHCR 2018). Each of these three nations is experiencing (or has experienced) different kinds of civil war, which have exacerbated forced (Anon 2017) or voluntary migration: with individuals, families and even entire communities leaving the nations of their birth or residence. In spite of such observations and human loss some NGOs speak of a “conspiracy of neglect” (Amnesty International 2015). Over 5,000 migrants and

refugees drowned as they attempted to cross the Mediterranean in 2016, on average over 14 people each day (Anon 2016). Behind these statistics of migration are countless stories of individual lives and divided families.

One of the most poignant stories was made unforgettable by the photographs that circulated of a tiny Syrian boy, with red t-shirt and blue shorts, lying on a beach, head down in the surf. Several pictures showed a Turkish policeman looking down at this tiny lifeless figure, another showed the policeman tenderly carrying the lifeless body away. Some described this like a modern *pieta* (Mitchell and Rey 2016). Aylan Kurdi's family, his father, mother and his five-year-old brother were trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea from Turkey to the Greek Island of Kos on an inflatable boat in search of safety and a peaceful life. The boat capsized and many refugees drowned. Three-year old Aylan, his five-year-old brother and his mother were among them, though his father, Abdullah, survived. The sea washed some of the bodies up onto the shore, among them the body of Aylan Kurdi. A Turkish photo-journalist, Nilufer Demir, took a series of photographs including the iconic image of the body of Aylan Kurdi. It became a symbolic representation of the effects of the ongoing violence in Syria, unsuccessful journeys fleeing from this violence toward peace and security, as well as the breaking of fragile human bodies and dignity. Turkish news media like other mainstream media initially refused to publish the photos, therefore the news first appeared on Twitter without being linked to any news source. The images soon went viral, with many claiming that it brought distant suffering close, effectively bringing the refugee crisis to life by showing a single death. Some claimed that this series of photos of Aylan led to some refugee policies being changed and some charitable giving temporarily being increased (see Mitchell and Rey 2016).

The need for religious literacy

These two stories, a new baby provoking vilification and a dead toddler provoking grief, illustrate contrasting responses to and coverage of the refugee crisis. While neither story speaks of welcome, they do both raise questions regarding how stories about refugees are covered and responded to, as well as the religious and ethical implications of such coverage. During the huge influx of the Middle Eastern and North African refugees and migrants into Europe, especially since 2015, a wide range of different media have played a significant role in reporting and framing their journeys and arrivals. While covering their journey from their homes and then across different European countries, reporting on the policy changes and attitudes of policymakers as well as concerns of European citizens toward the newcomers, the news media in the UK and beyond initially provided very little detailed information about who these new arrivals were and why they came (Chouliaraki and Stolic 2017). Many of the reports have reported and reflected negative attitudes toward refugees and migrants (Georgiou and Zaborowski 2017).

There were three recurring concerns: First, the refugees were represented as strangers, foreigners, about whom little was known; second, they were often depicted as scroungers or criminals; third, they are sometimes portrayed as dangerous Muslims, therefore many were likely to be terrorists (Georgiou and Zaborowski 2017). There are some counter examples of more positive reporting, where refugees and migrants were presented as vulnerable people who need to be spoken with, understood and then spoken for. Nevertheless, even the more sympathetic depictions portrayed them as silent actors, who could also be a threat to Western values and potentially dangerous (Georgiou and Zaborowski 2017), rather than as people who might bring skills, expertise and wisdom that could contribute to our society and our economy. This phenomenon raises critical questions such as: What prevented many

journalists from including the voices of the refugees and migrants in their stories? Why were their religious traditions, beliefs and practices commonly represented so superficially or negatively? How should the part played by religion in the refugee crisis be covered?

Answering such questions can provoke highly critical accounts of the journalistic coverage of the refugee crisis and of related stories about the part played by religion. It is striking how religion can either be entirely overlooked and ignored or stereotyped and caricatured in stories about the influx of refugees (Philo, Briant and Donald 2013). The same is true in relation to other news stories in which religion plays a significant role. Some scholars, such as Paul Marshall, Lela Gilbert and Roberta Green-Ahmanson (2009), writing before the current refugee crisis, have argued that many journalists have a blind spot when it comes to covering religion and can also be understandably hesitant in covering unknown territories or unknown areas of expertise. This approach is representative of those scholars who focus on the inadequacies of journalists' coverage of religion.

Not all voices are so critical. "Over the last three decades the coverage of religious news," according to Gower and Mitchell (2012, 1), "has radically changed" as "religion is no longer" seen by many journalists as "a 'soft' story." They argue that religious topics and issues "pervade the reporting of many stories related to domestic politics and foreign affairs alike" (Gower and Mitchell 2012, 1). Like other scholars before them (Hoover 2006, Zelizer and Allan 2011) they cite coverage of "the terrorist attacks in Western cities such as New York (11 September 2001), Madrid (11 March 2004) and London (7 July 2005), as well as the invasions of Afghanistan (from October 2001) and Iraq (from March 2003)," as evidence that "religion has increasingly broken into mainstream Western news agendas" (Gower and Mitchell 2012, 1). Gower and Mitchell also observe that others claim that "this process began even earlier with the Iranian Revolution (1979), the global performances of a *media friendly* Pope, John Paul II (1978–2005), and the rise of the *religious right* in the USA (from the late 1970s)" (Gower and Mitchell 2012, 1). Along with scholars such as Stewart Hoover (1998 and 2012), they go on to argue that the "cumulative result is that religion is less commonly marginalised, and is sometimes used as an interpretative key for making sense of many news stories" (Gower and Mitchell 2012, 1).

Nevertheless, in the case of covering the refugee story from the Middle East and North Africa, some western journalists portray refugees as coming from an unknown or feared religious traditions, as well as relatively unknown territories (Chouliaraki 2017). Moreover, some journalists appear to have reflected public anxieties and confusion about the Islamic religion (Matar 2017, Kumar 2018). Arguably, ignorance or suspicion about what is currently the world's second largest religious tradition, as well as blurring between refugees and migrants, has contributed to some negative or superficial reporting of this ongoing story in Europe and beyond.

News stories about refugees are one among many possible examples of where coverage of the religious dimension could be further improved. A number of other scholars and commentators have emphasized that religion is an important element in many of today's news stories (e.g., Religion and Media Centre n.d.), encouraging journalists to take religion far more seriously and to report religion and religious minority groups more accurately. To do so, it has been implied explicitly and implicitly through a number of different studies that many journalists would do well to deepen their understandings of the religious dimensions of both local and global international stories (Marshall, Gilbert and Green-Ahmanson 2009, Hoover 2012, Mitchell 2012, Al-Azami 2016). The improvement of journalistic religious literacy does matter for a number of reasons, including the sensitive nature of many religious aspects of news stories, the friction between certain religious communities and the tendency

for misunderstanding of religious traditions, beliefs and practices. Precisely what is meant by religious literacy is also an area of debate (Hoover 2012, Mitchell and Gower 2012, Dinham and Francis 2015). For the purposes of this discussion, we follow Diane Moore's definition, which was also accepted by the American Academy of Religion:

Religious literacy entails the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses. Specifically, a religiously literate person will possess 1) a basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of several of the world's religious traditions as they arose out of and continue to be shaped by particular social, historical and cultural contexts; and 2) the ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place.

(Moore 2007, 56–57)

A religiously literate account of the contemporary refugee crisis will therefore bear in mind the pertinent historical texts, beliefs, practices, as well as relevant social, historical and cultural contexts.

Increased religious literacy among journalists has the potential to enrich understanding of what lies behind the rapid growth in the number of refugees, especially since 2015, which caught many in Europe and beyond by surprise. Many journalists covered the rapidly evolving events through numerous stories of refugees attempting to journey across the Mediterranean Sea into European countries. Overladen boats, capsizing dinghies and failing life jackets were regularly represented but the refugees remained largely unknown. The refugees often became like objects, as they were rarely properly introduced as people. As suggested earlier, their voices as human beings were absent from the vast majority of media reports. So too were their religious beliefs. What was portrayed was either their vulnerability or the threat they might pose to European security and culture. Religion was commonly left out of the frame. For a brief moment, after the lifeless body of two-year-old Aylan Kurdi lying on a beach went viral, many news reports showed more sympathy toward refugee cases, even if religious practices and beliefs were understandably ignored (El-Enany 2016). This did not last long as new, even more dramatic stories replaced these memorable images. For example, the November 2015 Paris attacks further strengthened the negative image of many refugees, with a link to their religion, Islam. Arguably such negative reporting contributed to heightened anxiety and fear in such a way that it may have contributed to the increase in *Islamophobia* and hatred against refugees within Europe and elsewhere.

There is already a notable body of research into the relationship between religion, journalism and the news emerging out of North America (see, for example, Silk 1995, Buddenbaum 1998, Hoover 1998, Winston 2012, 2013). This stands in contrast to books by academics and journalists in Europe that commonly tend either to overlook religion or to deal with it in a largely superficial fashion (see, for example, Tumber 1999, Marr 2004). This is slowly changing in Europe and other parts of the world, especially following the rapidly increased interest in the place of Islam relating to a range of dramatic news stories (see, for example, Moore, Mason and Lewis 2008, Lynch 2008, 163–182). Both our chapter and the rest of this book contribute to these developing discussions around the world. Our intention in this chapter is to consider the value of journalists becoming more religiously literate, while also reflecting on how this could improve coverage of the refugee crisis.

Understanding the role that religion plays not only in refugees' lives but also in why some people leave their homes, why others drive them away and why some give considerable

time and money to welcome strangers would enrich interpretation of forced migrations. It might even dissipate some feelings of fear. Limited or superficial coverage of these issues can heighten anxieties, accentuate complexities and difficulties, as well as misinterpret different religions' roles in contributing to or alleviating suffering. In the sections that follow, both theories and practices will be discussed, particularly in order to consider how religious literacy among journalists, news reports and audiences can be developed and improved.

Developing religious literacy among journalists

Given the growing recognition of the significant and complex role of religion in many major news stories, it is not surprising that over the last two decades, increasing numbers of journalists, broadcasters and editors have recognized the importance of developing greater religious literacy in order to produce more balanced, accurate and insightful coverage (Marshall, Gilbert and Green-Ahmanson 2009). In an extensive report on religion and ethics coverage in 2017, the BBC admitted that "there is more we can do to increase levels of religious literacy within our teams" (BBC 2017, 26). In order to develop religious literacy in the BBC, they propose more work in at least three areas. First, to improve training at all levels (including on journalism foundation and leadership courses), as well as "online training in religious literacy" (BBC 2017). Second, to establish "ongoing cycle of briefings with external figures from religious and secular groups talking to relevant BBC teams on a particular theme" (BBC 2017). Third, to create "an audience portal that brings together audience data, qualitative and quantitative surveys, and external material to inform creative decision-making" (BBC 2017, 26). It is striking how little emphasis there is upon experiential learning and discovering the reality of lived religions. The success of such proposals will take some time to evaluate, especially because it is one thing to produce a report, it is another to implement the recommended actions. It is also a complex task to measure any increases in religious literacy in broadcasts, news reports and among journalists.

Nevertheless, this is a vital task that applies to both journalists and audiences, as the "risk is that people remain locked in their own filter bubbles and fail to understand other beliefs beyond their own" (BBC 2017, 26). Filter bubbles, or as they are more commonly known, echo chambers, can feel like safe places to live and to interpret the world from, but they can close down conversations and reduce empathy with those living beyond known spaces. More religiously literate journalists can contribute to more religiously literate audiences and vice versa.

Developing religious literacy is easier said than done, as religion is a broad and often-contested realm, meaning different things to different people. Superficial forms of religious literacy may not be enough for journalists who report events or represent religion in their news reports, because religious belief and practice are enormously diverse. One danger of attempts to represent religion is to turn a particular religious belief or practice into a recurring global or universal pattern, to assume that one representative of a religious tradition acts or speaks on behalf of that entire religion. For as situations change so does the interpretation and the practice of religion, as Al Azmeh emphasizes: "there are as many Islams as there are situations that sustain it" (Al-Azmeh 1993). Over time, and in different places, as practice changes, religious meaning and interpretations change too. These are living, evolving traditions. Therefore, a religiously literate journalist is better equipped to serve as an interpreter of fragmented, evolving and diverse religious traditions. Religious literacy will enable a journalist to give better coverage of the particular religious experiences and memories of a refugee from Iraq, for example, and the similarities and differences of a refugee from Syria or Afghanistan.

Furthermore, others such as Moore (2007) and Dinham and Francis (2015) argue that religious literacy ensures that persons are treated not as objects of news stories but as subjects

in their own right. In order to present them as subjects, the journalist needs to consider realistic ways of building a relationship with them involving dialogue and discussion, not simply for the purpose of building networks, exchanging knowledge, discovering facts, but for a deeper and meaningful insight into the subject's world. This issue becomes even more vital given that refugees come from different religious, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Foreign territory may become more familiar through meaningful conversations, but this will inevitably take time. Time is a commodity that is commonly in short supply in journalistic settings. Nevertheless, in spite of what Philip Schlesinger (1987, 105) memorably described as the "stop-watch culture" of news, it is noteworthy that several media organizations (not just the BBC, but also organizations such as Google and Reuters) are developing courses on religious literacy, to provide journalists with some knowledge about different religious traditions and practices. This input aims not only to educate journalists about central beliefs and core practices, but also to prepare journalists to listen carefully, in order to be able to cover complicated stories, controversial subjects and unfamiliar territories.

Alongside a pedagogic approach is a conversational approach for developing religious literacy among journalists. Proposed by a number of practitioners, this approach includes several elements; first, a journalist will enter into a dialogue with the marginalized people whose stories they are covering. In this dialogue the journalist's task will be not only to add to their existing knowledge and understanding of the subject's situation, but also to reflect critically upon their own pre-existing knowledge, their unconscious bias, through relationship and conversation with their subject. Second, as time permits, journalists can be in continuous conversation and negotiation with the information they receive, through experimenting, negotiating and even resisting dominant patterns of explanation: experimenting with new methods of interpretation, negotiating with different sources of meaning and resisting obvious or clichéd readings of an event. A conversational model allows for a multidimensional analysis of a religious news event and will include the voices of marginalized people.

Closely related to pedagogic and conversational approaches to developing journalistic religious literacy are further related skills, which can be described as different aspects of experiential approaches: first, noted earlier, the skill of listening carefully to individual's stories, second the skill of observing the impact of conflicts, chronic degradations and spectacular events upon religious practices and beliefs. For example, in the wake of recent Middle Eastern and North African conflicts, violence and wars, journalists have observed millions having to flee their homes and seek refugee status in both neighboring and distant countries. Many journalists have visited refugee camps or landing sites for refugee boats. These experiences have had a personal impact upon those covering this story (Georgiou and Zaborowski 2017). As people move, different religious traditions and beliefs have been brought into contact with others, further complicating the evolving religious landscape. Listening to, observing and participating first hand in these experiences can be a source of experiential learning, and even trauma, for both professional and amateur journalists.

Up to this point, we have argued for the value of pedagogical, conversational and experiential forms of developing religious literacy. As a result of these and other forms of educative processes, journalists are beginning to understand that in order to describe any stories of Muslim, Christian, Yazidi or other refugees, in Europe, one needs, from religious, cultural and political points of view, to go beyond the borders of Europe and the Mediterranean Sea into the Middle East and North Africa, where religion plays a complex role in the ongoing conflicts and civil wars. With the rise of Islamic extremism, the recurring conflicts apparently related to religion and the massive migrations into Europe and other parts of world, religion has become a crucial factor in understanding these situations, not only socially and

politically but also in the day-to-day ordinary lives of people (Williams 2012). There is a growing recognition that many news stories have a religious element. For example, this can be seen when considering stories about the likes of Aylan Kurdi, the reporting of the terrorist attacks in Paris, London and Brussels, as well as the uses of photographs of oceans of flowers and candles, paying tribute to the victims of such attacks, alongside coverage of the apparent rise of far-right groups. Arguably, these all are linked in different ways both to religious discourses and the ever-changing refugee crisis.

Identifying obstacles to religious literacy among journalists

There are some obvious difficulties raised by attempting to develop religious literacy among journalists. These include time and money. Training costs both time and resources. Of course, misunderstanding or misreporting the religious element of major stories can be even more costly in the long term. Less obvious but equally significant obstacles include audience expectations, complex networks, pressurized environments, communicative contexts and journalists' existing worldviews.

Besides, the audience's expectations are also the influences of audience's beliefs and anxieties. While audiences can contribute to journalistic content, journalists' own beliefs and anxieties can also influence the outcome of the news. For example, after the November Paris attacks more than half of the press articles and news of the period projected fear and negative views relating to refugees: Refugees were the most voiceless ones and appeared to be blamed – perpetuating stereotypes (Georgiou and Zaborowski 2017). If journalists primarily listen to native European audiences, who are often anxious about refugees being in their communities, then their fears and concerns may get reiterated in news stories (Georgiou and Zaborowski 2017). These are commonly related to fear of the unknown: Who are these people, what is their history, their culture, their religion, why do they want to come here or why are they here? In response to such questions, the journalist may well create stories that mirror and even heighten audience concerns. The largely negative portrayal of refugees in both terrestrial and digital media and especially their perceived links to religious extremism may further increase anxiety (Georgiou and Zaborowski 2017). Much media coverage has tended to emphasize the potential threat that refugees bring to European security and cultural values, rather than emphasizing on the exceptional benefit that many young refugees may bring to the economy of an ageing European population (Georgiou and Zaborowski 2017). As audiences become more concerned, it seems, some journalists reflect their concerns uncritically, which in turn might contribute to heightened anxiety. In this way, a communicative vicious circle may develop, and religious literacy is perceived as an unnecessary skill to develop.

A related obstacle to journalists developing religious literacy is the complex networks of relations and the communicative contexts that reporters inhabit and work amidst. News stories, such as those about the influx of refugees, are produced in complex cultural and social contexts as well as pressurized professional, political and economic settings. This inevitably affects how journalists are inculcated and trained, as well as how they cover news stories. In *The Language of News* Roger Fowler claims that:

News is not a natural phenomenon emerging from “reality,” but a *product*. It is produced by an industry, shaped by the bureaucratic and economic structure of that industry, the relations between the media and other industries and, most importantly, by relations with government and with other political organisations.

(Fowler 1991, 222)

All these factors contribute to the coverage of the many layers of the refugee crisis in Europe and beyond. This also adds to the complexity of the relationships between religion, journalists and audiences. In this tangled network of relationships, various experimentations, negotiations and dialogues take place, sometimes creating new narratives of meaning that can make sense to wider societies and communities. As Fowler goes on to suggest, news “reflects, and in return shapes, the prevailing values of a society in a particular historical context” (Fowler 1991, 222). In addition, the growth of social media and citizen journalism has also created challenges that affect the treatment of original news stories and, as a result, the journalistic treatment of refugees or migrants. For example, political polarization, especially through social media, combined with the predisposition toward so-called fake news, has led many to search not for the truth but rather for what confirms their original beliefs.

The complex network of relationships is further complicated by the communicative context in which the news is produced. Daily journalistic rituals, routines and habits shape how professional journalists put reality together (Schlesinger 1987). The manufacturing of news is in the words of John Eldridge a “massive feat of social construction” (Eldridge 1993, 4). Journalists, photographers and editors join forces to retell news stories from a particular angle. The shape of news organizations, influenced by corporate culture, economic constraints and owners’ priorities all contribute to the formation of mainstream news. Around a hundred years ago, Lord Northcliffe (1865–1922) directed his newspapers, *The Times* and the *Daily Mail*, to demonize Germans, thereby cultivating an environment where it was all the easier to tumble into and then continue the so-called Great War (Granfield 2013).

A further obstacle to developing religious literacy is the journalist’s own unrecognized bias or blind spots. In *Unreliable Sources: How the Twentieth Century was Reported*, Simpson (2010, ix) argues that “Journalists are like portrait painters: their work will be accurate and fair, or inaccurate and distorted, according to their individual capability.” This interpretation of journalism is too individualistic. As we have seen, it is more than just a journalist’s personal capabilities that shape coverage of stories about religion and its relation to the refugee crisis.

There are other factors and pressures, which inform a story (Shoemaker and Reese 1991). Even if they seek to maintain balance and impartiality, a journalist’s own upbringing, life story and worldview will impact their angle on any story that they cover, whether it be the refugee crisis or another more explicitly religious story (Ginneken 1998, 66). Some researchers claim that journalists working in the USA tend to be more skeptical toward religious beliefs than the wider population (Lichter, Rothman and Lichter 1986). There is less empirical data about journalists working in Europe, but nevertheless, the background, training and beliefs of individual journalists will influence or at least inform the way that they cover a story, including its religious aspects.

Overcoming obstacles to religious literacy among journalists

How can these obstacles be overcome? In an earlier section, we described some of the practices that can increase religious literacy among journalists, including pedagogical training, experiential learning and conversation rooted in careful listening. These practices may provide some of the necessary foundations to overcome these obstacles. This is a valuable project as both professional and amateur journalists still have the opportunity not only to represent the world in a way that can influence meaning making but also to bring the different perspectives about an event into conversation with each other and then to their audiences. In this context, if there is growing anxiety among citizens, combined with a rise of racism, then

journalists, editors and other broadcasters can play a significant role: enabling refugees and migrants to speak in public for themselves, contributing to the creation of more nuanced and empathetic stories. Digital media makes this technologically simpler. How? One way to achieve this is for journalists to develop a more conversational form of engagement with their subjects so that the audience will in turn hear the refugee's voice and opinions, and so learn what they can contribute to their new society and economy. This in turn may elicit greater empathy between incoming refugees and fearful or apathetic audiences. This could then lead to refugees being seen not as disposable objects but as valuable human beings with distinct cultures, histories and beliefs, who could enhance our communities. In this way, religious literacy begins with careful listening and moves toward conversations and different kinds of empathy (Boltanski 1999).

Increasingly religiously literate journalists have the opportunity to report news in a way that is enriched by their deeper understanding of religious beliefs and practices. In reality, stories about the movement of refugees into Europe as well as other stories with religious undertones have created new potential for religiously literate reporters to find new ways practicing their craft. One of the ways is to adopt the audiences' activities of experimenting, negotiating and resisting the news reports they receive, while journalists are submerged in the absorbing processes of investigation, interpretation and reporting of news. This process might, however, be more complex than simply mirroring audiences' playfulness with news, since for professional journalists it also involves navigating within news organizations and their demanding agendas and complicated histories.

Traditionally, experimenting, negotiating and resisting have described audiences' activities as they read, interpret and reproduce the news and information they receive (Afshari 2017). Journalists covering the religious aspects of the refugee crisis can and often do embrace similar practices: They too can experiment with different ways of collecting materials, be open to negotiating with diverse interpretations and resist understudied and stereotypical assumptions. This approach will give journalists the potential to bring to light hidden data and unfamiliar facts, to offer more accurate interpretations, to include multiple and diverse voices. This process will render the unfamiliar familiar, and in complex situations, in which it is no longer enough or easy to collect and report the facts truthfully, will help journalists to seek out, to analyze and to interpret what they perceive is the reality behind the influx of hundreds of thousands of migrants (Marsden and Savigny 2009). To cover stories in depth, journalists obviously need to go beyond the public's assumed knowledge in order to negotiate with different sources of meaning. In this way, new, richer narratives can be created in the midst of multiple competing views.

While some scholars and journalists focus on precise details, specific incidents or relatively short periods, others have taken a broader view, charting the evolution of different news media. Taking a broader historical perspective, writers such as Harold Innis (2007), Marshal McLuhan (1964) and Walter Ong (1982) have developed what could be described as grand theories of media evolution. In this comparatively brief essay, we have not attempted to follow their example and attempt to outline a grand theory of religion and journalism. The increasing complexity of religious involvement in events and incidents concerning refugees from Muslim background requires journalists to adopt experientialist or practice-based approaches that could help us develop values that are now perhaps rather marginal, such as doubt and being open: "open to data and open to being wrong, to redoing one's own work" (Witschge, Anderson, Domingo and Hermida 2018). The complex history of news, journalism and media interpretation offer rich insights into the relationship between journalism and religion (Katz et al. 2003), which is considered in more detail in several of chapters of this book.

Conclusion

How can the complex web of competing stories be untangled? Our discussion began by considering two visually memorable and contrasting news stories; the tiny body of Aylan Kurdi, washed up on a Turkish beach near Bodrum and the picture of a refugee family cherishing a newly born baby called Asal. To conclude, a third image will be introduced: Omran Daqneesh, a five-year-old Syrian boy, sitting bloodied in an ambulance chair after being dragged from the rubble. Taken on August 17, 2016, the image soon went viral. Both social media and mainstream media immediately covered the story. This five-year-old boy had been injured in a Russian-led air strike on the rebel-held Al-Qaterji, in the neighborhood of Aleppo in Syria. His family, three siblings and his parents, were rescued. He and his brother were taken to the hospital. His brother, Ali, died on 20 August. This air strike claimed the lives of eight people, including five children. The image of the injured Omran sitting bloodied in an ambulance chair after being dragged from the rubble caused international outrage and was widely featured in newspapers, on television and in social media. His image was described as “the image of Aleppo’s suffering” (Palin 2017) or “the real face of the Syrian war” (AFP 2016). Omran survived and now is living as a refugee in Turkey. Taken out of context, this story, like the stories of Aylan and Asal, has no obvious religious links, but set in a historical, cultural and social context religion becomes a contributing factor for understanding the cause and significance of what has happened in Syria, Austria and the Mediterranean.

Behind each of these visually arresting images are multiple evolving stories and contexts that require more in-depth conversations between journalists and audiences. They are not frozen in time, but reflect many dynamic elements within the creation of news. Stories evolve, contexts are contested, journalists are creative and audiences weave new meaning into stories that they are offered. There is a multiplicity of representations, reporters and receptions, emerging out of a range of settings. The digitization of communication has further complexified this layered reality. We have seen that in order to develop a nuanced analysis of the development of religious literacy among journalists, it is useful to reflect upon both obstacles and practices.

Mitchell (2012) has argued that the majority of scholarly studies and critical journalistic reflections have concentrated upon the actual content, the contexts and the producers of a news story related to religion. It is much rarer to consider the role of the audience. Nevertheless, with the digitization and convergence of communicative technologies, the growth of digital, online and citizen journalism, alongside the growth of interactive forms of news production this is rapidly evolving. These rarer audience-centered approaches ask questions such as how viewers, readers and listeners respond to and interact with what they learn? This approach correctly highlights how there are multiple audiences, bringing a variety of beliefs, traditions and theologies, as well as memories, personal experiences and narratives, to any news story they encounter. With the increase of digital citizen journalism, younger audiences (especially 19–34 years) are increasingly turning to unexpected parts of the web for news (Mitchell 2015). As Rupert Murdoch argues this age group “don’t want a God like figure from above to tell them what’s important” (Murdoch speech quoted in Allan 2010, 143). Increasingly audiences attempt to inform journalists what stories are noteworthy, though whether new media actually facilitate the building of bridges between amateur and professional news gatherers is open to debate. Some stories do circulate through independent media and percolate into the public sphere in such a way that they put the issue onto the

professional news journalist's agenda in unexpected fashions. In other words, the range of agenda setting sources has radically increased for both audiences and journalists over the last two decades.

Audiences now arguably have more channels for public expression and therefore have the capacity, even if it is underused (Mitchell 2012), to influence what is included in mainstream news frames. In the light of this, the traditional news values (Galtung and Ruge 1973), which determine where and whether a story is covered, are open to further question. While journalistic craft has become more professional, religious leaders have become more open to challenge and criticism – both by journalists and by non-journalistic audiences (e.g., Askew and Wilk 2002, Rothenbuhler and Coman 2004, Livingstone 2006, 337–359, Miller 2006). Drawing upon these insights, the complex activity of the audience can be taken into account. Even when arguing for improving journalistic religious literacy, it is important to understand that audiences are by no means bound to be passive receivers of news stories but have the potential to become dynamic respondents in the face of the stories that they see or hear. Increasingly expressive audiences are adding to what Michel de Certeau (1984, 186) describes in another context as the “interminable recitation of stories.” As stories are repeated, they are edited, adapted and elaborated upon by audiences. As they circulate, stories can grow or dissipate in significance. Audiences too can become both more religiously and media literate (Potter 2004), for by so doing, they may even contribute to the journalists themselves becoming more religiously literate, which in turn has the potential to shed more light on both painful and memorable stories about human suffering.

Further readings

- Hoover, S. M., 1998. *Religion in the News: Faith and Journalism in American Public discourse*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publication.
- Stewart Hoover examines the relationship between religion and the news media. Drawing upon interviews with journalists, he analyses practices within news media outlets, as well as providing a more general overview of religion and journalism in American public discourse.
- Knott, K., Poole, E. and Taira, A., 2013. *Media Portrayals of the Religion and the Secular Sacred*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited.
- This is a comparative and longitudinal study of coverage of religion in British mainstream newspapers and television. By replicating the 1982–1983 study in 2008–2010, this project shows what has changed over almost 30 years relating to portrayals of religion in British media.
- Mitchell, J., 2007. *Media Violence and Christian Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jolyon Mitchell considers a number of practices including remembering, reframing and re-describing violent representations through news, photography, film and adverts. He goes beyond focusing upon the content and producers of media violence, to the role and responsibilities of the audience.
- Mitchell, J., 2012. *Promoting Peace, Inciting Violence: The Role of Religion and Media*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Jolyon Mitchell explores the ambivalence of the sacred and the role of different media in a number of settings including after the First World War, the Iran-Iraq War, the genocide in Rwanda in the year 1994, creative responses to terrorist attacks and use of the arts to promote peace.
- Mitchell, J. and Gower, O., eds., 2012. *Religion and the News*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited.
- Essays by journalists, scholars and religious leaders reflecting upon the relationship between religion and news.
- Poole, E. and Richardson, J. E., eds., 2006. *Muslims and the News Media*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Written by both academic authorities and media practitioners, this book examines the role and representations of Muslims in the news media, particularly within climates of threat, fear and misunderstanding.

Note

- 1 According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees:

Refugees are persons who are outside their country of origin for reasons of feared persecution, conflict, generalized violence, or other circumstances that have seriously disturbed public order and, as a result, require international protection. The refugee definition can be found in the 1951 Convention and regional refugee instruments, as well as UNHCR's Statute.

(*Refugeesmigrants 2016*)

References

- AFP, 2016. Dazed Omran the 'real face' of Syrian War. *Guardian Online*, 19 August. Available at <https://guardian.ng/news/dazed-omran-the-real-face-of-syrian-war/>, accessed 12 July 2018.
- Afshari, S., 2017. *The Reception of Christian Television in Contemporary Iran: An Analysis of Audience Interactions and Negotiations*. Dissertation. The University of Edinburgh.
- Al-Azami, S., 2016. *Religion in the Media: A Linguistic Analysis*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Al-Azmeh, A., 1993. *Islam and Modernity*. London: Verso.
- Allan, S., 2010. *News Culture*. 3rd ed. Berkshire: Open University Press.
- Amnesty International, 2015. *The Global Refugee Crisis: A Conspiracy of Neglect*. London: Amnesty International: Amnesty International Report no. POL 40/1796/2015. Available at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol40/1796/2015/en/>, accessed 27 July 2018.
- Anon, 2016. Migrant Crisis: UN Says 5,000 Drown Trying to Reach Europe this Year: *BBC Online*, 23 December. Available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-38420779>, accessed 30 January 2019.
- Anon, 2017. *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2016*. Geneva: UNHCR. Available at <http://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2016/>, accessed 29 June 2018.
- Askew, K. and Wilk, R. R., eds., 2002. *The Anthropology of Media: A Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- BBC, 2017. *BBC Religion and Ethics Review*. Available at http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/insidethebbc/howwework/reports/pdf/religion_and_ethics_review.pdf, accessed 20 July 2018.
- Boltanski, L., 1999. *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Buddenbaum, J. M., 1998. *Reporting News about Religion: An Introduction for Journalists*. Ames: Iowa State University Press.
- Certeau, M. D., 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Chouliaraki, L., 2017. Symbolic bordering: the Self-representation of migrants and refugees in digital news. *Popular Communication*, [e-journal] 15(2). Available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/15405702.2017.1281415>, accessed 25 July 2018.
- Chouliaraki, L. and Stolic, T., 2017. Rethinking Media Responsibility in the Refugee "crisis": A Visual Typology of European News. *Media, Culture & Society*, [e-journal] 39(8). Available at <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0163443717726163>, accessed 27 July 2018.
- Dinham, A. and Francis, M., eds., 2015. *Religious Literacy in Policy and Practice*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Eddy, M., 2018. Vienna "New Year's Baby" Greeted First with Hate, then Hearts: *The New York Times Online*, 4 January. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/04/world/europe/vienna-new-years-baby.html>, accessed 30 January 2019.
- Eldridge, J., 1993. *Getting the Message: News, Truth, and Power*. Oxon: Routledge.
- El-Enany, N., 2016. Aylan Kurdi: The Human Refugee. *Law and Critique*, [e-journal] 27(1). Available at: <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s10978-015-9175-7.pdf>, accessed 26 July 2018.
- Fowler, R., 1991. *Language in the News: Discourse and Ideology in the Press*. London: Routledge.
- Galtung, J. and Ruge, M., 1973. Structuring and Selecting News. In: Cohen, S. and Young, J., eds. *The Manufacture of News*. London: Constable Firm, 62–72.
- Georgiou, M. and Zaborowski, R., 2017. *Media Coverage of the "refugee crisis": A Cross-European Perspective DGI (2017)03*. London: Council of Europe. LSE Media and Migration Project. Available at <https://rm.coe.int/1680706b00>, accessed 21 July 2018.
- Ginneken, J. V., 1998. *Understanding Global News: A Critical Introduction*. London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: SAGE Publications.
- Granfield, G. A., 2013. *The Press and Society: From Caxton to Northcliffe*. 2nd ed. Oxon: Routledge.

- Hoover, S. M., 1998. *Religion in the News: Faith and Journalism in American Public Discourse*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publication.
- Hoover, S. M. 2006. *Religion in the Media Age*. New York: Routledge.
- Hoover, S. M., 2012. Quantity, Equality and Religion in the News Since 9/11. In: Winston, D., ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and the American News Media*. New York: Oxford University Press, 81–92.
- Innis, H. A., 2007. *Empire and Communications*. Reprinted. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Katz, E., Peters, J., Liebe, T., Orloff, A. and Raabe, J., 2003. *Canonic Texts in Media Research: Are there Any? Should there Be? How about These?* Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Kumar, D., 2018. The Right Kind of “Islam.” *Journalism Studies*, [e-journal] 19(8). Available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1461670X.2016.1259012>, accessed 20 July 2018.
- Lichter, S. R., Rothman, S. and Lichter, L. S., 1986. *The Media Elite*. Bethesda: Adler & Adler.
- Livingstone, S., 2006. The Changing Nature of Audiences: From the Mass Audience to the Interactive Media User. In: Valdivia, A. N., ed. *A Companion to Media Studies*. Oxford: Blackwell, 337–359.
- Lynch, J., 2008. *Debates in Peace Journalism*. Sydney: Sydney University Press.
- Marr, A., 2004. *My Trade: A Short History of British Journalism*. London: Macmillan.
- Marshall, P., Gilbert, L. and Green-Ahmann, R., 2009. *Blind Sport: When Journalists Don't Get Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Marsden, L. and Savigny, H., 2009. *Media, Religion and Conflict*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited.
- Matar, D., 2017. *Media Coverage of the Migration Crisis in Europe: A Confused and Polarized Narrative*. London: Strategics Sectors|Culture and Society. Available at http://www.iemed.org/observatori/arees-danalisi/arxiu-adjunts/anuari/med.2017/IEMed_MedYearbook2017_media_migration_crisis_Matar.pdf, accessed 21 June 2018.
- McLuhan, M., 1964. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York: MIT Press.
- Miller, T., ed., 2006. *A Companion to Cultural Studies*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Mitchell, J., 2007. *Media Violence and Christian Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mitchell, J., 2012. *Promoting Peace, Inciting Violence: The Role of Religion and Media*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Mitchell, J. and Gower, O., 2012. *Religion and the News*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited.
- Mitchell, J., 2015. Journalism. In: Lynch, J. and Mazur, E. M., eds. *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture*. New York: Routledge, 65–79.
- Mitchell, J. and Rey, J., 2016. Religion, Evolving Media and Distant Suffering. In: Apostolos-Coppadona, D., ed. *Religion: Material Religion*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 151–173.
- Moore, D., 2007. *Overcoming Religious Literacy: A Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Education*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Moore, K., Mason, P. and Lewis, J., 2008. *Images of Islam in the UK: The Representation of British Muslims in the National Print News Media 2000–2008*. Cardiff: Cardiff University and Channel 4. Available at <http://orca.cf.ac.uk/53005/1/08channel4-dispatches.pdf>, accessed 1 February 2019.
- Ong, W., 1982. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd.
- Palin, M., 2017. The Face of Aleppo's Suffering Is “alive and well.” *Nypost*, 6 June. Available at <https://nypost.com/2017/06/06/the-face-of-alepos-suffering-is-alive-and-well/>, accessed 20 June 2018.
- Philo, G., Briant, E. and Donald, P., 2013. *Bad News for Refugees*. London: Pluto Press.
- Poole, E. and Richardson, J. E., eds., 2006. *Muslims and the News Media*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Potter, J. W., 2004. *Theory of Media Literacy: A Cognitive Approach*. London: Sage Publications.
- Refugeesmigrants, 2016. *Definitions [Refugees and Migrants]*. Available at <https://refugeesmigrants.un.org/definitions>, accessed 27 April 2018.
- Religion Media Centre, n.d. *Religion Media Centre*. Available at <https://religionmediacentre.org.uk/>, accessed 28 July 2020.
- Rothenbuhler, E. and Coman, M., eds., 2004. *Media Anthropology*. London: Sage.
- Schlesinger, P., 1987. *Putting “reality” Together: BBC News*. London: Methuen.
- Shoemaker, P. J. and Reese, S. D., 1991. *Mediating the Message – Theories of Influence on Mass Media Content*. Longman: New York.
- Silk, M., 1995. *Unsecular Media: Making News of Religion in America*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Simpson, J., 2010. *Unreliable Sources: How the Twentieth Century was Reported*. Oxford: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Tumber, H., 1999. *News: A Reader*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- UNHCR, 2018. *Figures at a Glance*. Available at <http://www.unhcr.org/uk/figures-at-a-glance.h>, accessed 7 April 2018.
- Williams, R., 2012. *Faith in the Public Square*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.
- Winston, D., ed., 2012. *The Oxford Handbook on Religion and the American News Media*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Winston, D., ed., 2013. *Heartland Religion: The American News Media and the Reagan Revolution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Witschge, T., Anderson, CW., Domingo, D. and Hermida, A., 2018. Dealing with the Mess (We Made): Unraveling Hybridity, Normativity, and Complexity in Journalism Studies. *Journalism*, [e-journal] 20(5). Available at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1464884918760669#-articleCitationDownloadContainer>, accessed 20 January 2019.
- Young-Powell, A., 2018. *President Steps in Over Islamophobic abuse of Austria's New Year Baby*. *Telegraph Online*. 7 January. Available at <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/01/07/president-steps-islamophobic-abuse-austrias-new-year-baby/>, accessed 20 July 2018.
- Zelizer, B. and Allan, S., 2011. *Journalism after September 11*. 2nd ed. New York and Abingdon: Routledge.