

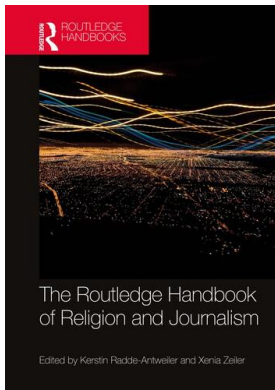
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4

THE ROLE AND FUNCTION OF JOURNALISM FOR RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS

Tim Hutchings

Introduction

In 1840, Alexis de Tocqueville described the immense influence of the press on democracy in the USA. Newspapers, he argued, served as “the chief democratic instrument of freedom” (De Tocqueville 1840, 730), because they provided a means for exposing corruption and holding the powerful to account. The press also offered a voice to every oppressed citizen: each individual member of society can “appeal to the whole nation” and all of mankind for help and “the only means he has of making this appeal is by the press” (De Tocqueville 1840, 729). The newspaper therefore “places a powerful weapon within every man’s reach, which the weakest and loneliest of them all may use” (De Tocqueville 1840, 729).

This classic understanding of journalism is still influential today, encountered – and disputed – in academic literature and public debate. In the study of religion and the news, however, this whole question of purpose has been largely overlooked. Instead, researchers have extensively explored how religion is represented in the news, typically by using content, discourse or visual analysis to study the stories journalists choose to tell about religious beliefs, practices and people (see, for example, Knott, Poole and Taira 2013). This media-centric, often quantitative approach focuses attention on the content of the media, assuming that agency in news production lies primarily with journalists and editors. For example, researchers might look for key themes in the media representation of different religious groups, compare representations of religious traditions in different media sources and see how themes have shifted over time (e.g., Winston 2012). This is a valuable approach, but it ignores two of the key issues that attracted de Tocqueville’s attention: The normative debate over the proper role and function of journalism and the contextual, strategic question of how individual actors outside the media industry try to use the press to share their own messages with the public.

This chapter will explore what religious organizations themselves say about the news and its role and function in society. We will also demonstrate some of the work, training and strategic thinking that religious organizations invest in the project of achieving media representation. We will start by introducing the standard representational approach to religion and the news, showing how the common call for journalists to develop *religious literacy* is founded on this particular understanding of what news is and how it is made. To challenge

this emphasis, we will introduce three rare examples of published academic studies that pay proper attention to the work that religious actors do to become trusted sources for journalists.

We will then set out a new typology of six different visions of the role and function of the journalist. Three visions are drawn from classic journalism studies (Donohue, Tichenor and Olien 1995, 116, 118): the *watchdog* (who protects the public), the *lapdog* (who agrees uncritically with the powerful) and the *guard dog* (who works to represent and protect a special group by attacking their enemies). This chapter proposes three additional visions, which express common religious understandings of the figure of the journalist: the *puppy dog* (who just needs a proper education), the *working dog* (a highly trained professional with particular skills, needs and expectations) and the *hunting dog* (an aggressive enemy driven by personal bias).

This chapter ends by exploring the blending of these six visions in three interviews, all based in the UK. These interviews represent three different religious organizations, each with a different kind of relationship with old and new media: Anna Drew, a communications director employed by two of the largest Christian denominations, the Methodists and the Church of England; Archbishop Angaelos of the Coptic Orthodox Church, which is based primarily in Egypt and Miqdaad Versi, a media monitor for the British Muslim Council. These examples are of course limited to the religious and media context of the UK, and further research will be needed to assess the extent to which the proposed six-part typology can be adjusted or expanded to reflect a wider range of religious, media and geographical contexts. Nonetheless, even this limited group of interviews can help us to recognize the diversity and complexity of religious understandings of the role and function of the news and the different approaches religious groups have developed to improve their representation.

Media representation and religious literacy

Research focused on analysis of media representations has achieved significant gains in our understanding of the nature and influence of the media's treatment of religion. For example, numerous studies of media representations of religion in Europe and the USA have demonstrated that Islam is associated closely in news coverage with violence and terrorism (Said 1997 [1981], Elahi and Kahn 2017). According to Kim Knott, Elizabeth Poole and Teemu Taira (2013, 79), references to Islam in the UK media increased almost tenfold between 1982 and 2008, and "militancy and extremism were the principal topics." As schoolteacher and imam Monawar Hussain writes in his contribution to Jolyon Mitchell and Owen Gower's valuable collection *Religion and the News*, this repeated theme has real consequences for Muslim audiences, producing a portrayal that is "deeply inaccurate, Islamophobic, disempowering and leading to a feeling of alienation" (Hussain 2012, 130).

In constructions of religion and the news that focus on representation and literacy, religious communities or organizations play a passive role. They exist to be reported by journalists, and it is the nature and quality of the reporting that merits scholarly attention. Journalistic inaccuracy is the problem, ignorance is the diagnosis and religious literacy for journalists is therefore the solution. For example, Paul Wooley, former director of the Christian thinktank *Theos*, complains that "it is striking how few religion 'specialists' in the news media are specialists in any real sense of the word" (Wooley 2012, 69) and insists that "media organizations have a responsibility to ensure that news producers and reporters who cover religion are religiously literate" (Wooley 2012, 75).

In response to these kinds of criticisms, organizations and initiatives have been created to teach and reward a higher standard of religious journalism. Jolyon Mitchell and Sara Afshari

(this volume) distinguish between pedagogical, conversational and experiential approaches to religious literacy training, based, respectively, on teaching journalists, involving them in discussions or sending them to directly observe and participate in events affecting religious people. In the UK, the *Sandford St Martin Trust* (The Sandford St Martin Trust n.d.) was founded in 1978 to reward high standards in broadcasting, and the new *Religion Media Centre* (Religion Media Centre 2018) was launched by former journalists in 2018 to run training events teaching journalists to cover religion more effectively.

This literacy-focused approach can overlook the active roles that religious organizations and individuals themselves can play in imagining and constructing the news. The diverse perspectives represented in the recent essay volumes *Religion and the News* (Mitchell and Gower 2012) and *On Islam* (Pennington and Kahn 2018) demonstrate that religious organizations have their own ideas about the proper function of the media and often aspire to shape their own media representation. Radde-Antweiler, Grüenthal and Gogolok have recently studied communication in the Catholic Church in Germany and reported widespread concern among priests that the media “will gain the power to define Church topics, discussions and positions” and that “the public image of the Church will be endangered” by inaccurate and disproportionate media coverage (Radde-Antweiler, Grüenthal and Gogolok 2018, 279). At the same time, these priests still “use a very broad range of media” (Radde-Antweiler, Grüenthal and Gogolok 2018, 277) and have developed their own strategies to promote the message they want to communicate. Instead of waiting passively for journalists to decide how to represent them, many religious groups are finding ways to compete for the kind of attention they want to receive.

Textual analysis of media representation and studies of the training and working processes of journalists and editors do not address the labor undertaken by religious groups to help particular stories, images, sources and interpretations to come to the attention of particular journalists in the first place. This kind of labor is, of course, not always successful: A media-centric approach will also miss all of the disappointments and failures experienced by religious organizations, when their carefully crafted press releases and publicity events do not attract the desired quality or quantity of coverage. To develop a more thorough understanding of the relationship between religious organizations and the news, we need to pay close attention to how the many press officers, communications directors and other media specialists who operate on behalf of religious institutions understand and conduct their work.

Journalists and their sources: three case studies

Academic studies of this kind of religious media work are relatively rare. Researchers have studied mainstream media representations of religion in great detail, and they have also analyzed specialist media produced by religious organizations, like religious television, radio and social media channels. However, the role of religious organizations themselves in actively generating mainstream media coverage has been largely overlooked. To introduce some of the contours of the field, we will focus here on three recent and valuable case studies: Miriam Diez Bosch’s (2018) study of the reporters who specialize in covering the Vatican, Xenia Zeiler’s (2018) study of the press work of the USA-based Universal Society of Hinduism and Michael Munnik’s (2018) study of the relationship between journalists and Muslim sources in Scotland.

According to Bosch, the turning point in relations between the Vatican and the press was the Second Vatican Council. Before the 1960s, she argues, “misinformation and obfuscation in the Holy See were the norm. Public and media transparency was not favoured.

Nor was information considered a right for the citizenry. Journalists had no direct access to sources” (Bosch 2018, 80). After the Council, the Vatican developed a new theology of communication, seeing the press not as a threat but as an aid to the goal of communicating accurately with the world. This new era soon encountered new challenges: “the new dynamics of media clashed with an institutional power that was not used to explaining itself to others” (Bosch 2018, 80). Over time, both the journalists and the Vatican have had to adapt. The many hundreds of accredited reporters from around the world who now cover the Vatican have to become experts in navigating this complex organization, understanding “where the power is, and who represents it” (Bosch 2018, 84). At the same time, journalists have the freedom to cover only the details and individuals they consider newsworthy and tend to pay more attention to crisis and scandal than to the Vatican’s preferred messages (Bosch 2018, 85). The Vatican has had to adjust its own communication approach to fit journalists’ needs and expectations: “public and media reactions today have an impact on how papal statements and other operations with public relations consequences are packaged and timed” (Bosch 2018, 86).

Xenia Zeiler’s study of the Universal Society of Hinduism shows a completely different kind of relationship between a religious organization and the media. The society was founded by Indian American Rajan Zed and serves to promote his own understanding of Hinduism – and himself – within the USA and worldwide. Zeiler reports that “Zed intensively uses media platforms” (Zeiler 2018, 304) to promote his views, like many other members of diasporic religious communities. For widely dispersed groups without access to their own channels of communication, engaging with the press offers a rare opportunity to spread messages, advertise identities and challenge public misconceptions. Zed specializes in the production of press releases, and Zeiler argues that this form of publication is “most probably ... the main reason for his public success” (Zeiler 2018, 305). Each press release targets a current news story and offers a clear and controversial stance in language that is ready for journalists to quote. Each press release also explains what Hinduism is and why it matters and intensively promotes Zed himself as a reliable expert who speaks on behalf of a global religious community. Journalists use these press releases extensively as sources, and this media presence has established Zed as “a widely-perceived authority on Hinduism in the USA” (Zeiler 2018, 306). In this case, we see an individual entrepreneur become a religious institution by providing a valuable service – quotable, controversial content – to journalists who might have no prior knowledge or interest in his religious community.

Michael Munnik’s (2018) study offers a third perspective, looking at a cluster of voices competing for attention. Munnik surveys the field of Muslim news sources in Glasgow, interviewing more than a dozen different individuals and groups who all hope to win media coverage for their chosen messages and campaigns. Using these interviews, he distinguishes between two kinds of sources: *authorized knowers* who have amassed social capital that journalists can recognize and *new entrants* who must win media attention in more imaginative ways. *Authorized knowers* develop a reputation among journalists through many years of media work, community leadership or participation in high-status professions like law and politics. *New entrant* groups do not have these advantages, but may try to compensate by undergoing media training in how to become better sources and attract better coverage. When Munnik’s example of an *authorized knower* describes his media relations activities, the source “gives the impression of a stage manager, orchestrating all the media actors to contribute to the outcome he wanted” (Munnik 2018, 9). The source persuades journalists to publish his preferred stories by drawing on his close personal relationships within the media industry, but also by knowing exactly how the journalistic process functions, including what

information and verification journalists need before they can publish and what timeline they need to work to. In contrast, Munnik's example of a *new entrant* organization has to work without this base of knowledge and networking. Without personal contacts, they choose instead to publish a press release on Twitter. As the campaign leader reported to Munnik (2018, 12), "no one picked it up," leaving the group to guess what might have gone wrong: "it may be there was something bigger that week, something else happened. So there's nothing you can do about that."

These three contrasting studies demonstrate that reporting about religion emerges from a process that includes a network of actors who are often invisible in the final media product. Religious news is negotiated between journalists, editors, institutions, more or less trusted sources and communication entrepreneurs, and each party may have their own agenda, strategy and understanding of what is happening. Powerful religious institutions like the Vatican can try to influence media coverage by providing a service to interested journalists, helping them to access authoritative sources and write accurate stories, while encouraging them to share a favorable interpretation of the institution's activities. To ensure accurate coverage, journalists covering the Vatican are expected to work with the Vatican Press Office and to develop specialist knowledge not only of Catholic doctrine but also of the Vatican's complex bureaucracy and power structure. In contrast, individuals like Rajan Zed who do not represent such high-profile groups can use their knowledge of the needs and interests of journalists to become publicly recognized as religious authorities. It is precisely the ignorance of American journalists about Hinduism that allows Zed to present himself as a reliable educator and spokesperson. The Muslim sources discussed by Munnik (2018) are more ambivalent about their efforts to win media attention. They undergo media training and try to develop networks of contacts to help improve the impact of their own communication projects. Munnik's *authorized knower* works quietly behind the scenes to build credibility and social capital in the media industry, while the *new entrant* organization struggles for attention on social media against competing news stories.

Six theories of journalism: developing a new typology

As these three examples demonstrate, the problem religious organizations believe they face in the media is not just inaccurate representation or media stereotyping. Nor can it always be fixed by encouraging journalists to undertake basic religious literacy training. To build a more nuanced picture, we need a broader understanding of what religious organizations actually believe about the role and function of journalism. What do they perceive to be the essential nature and purpose of the news media? This section develops a new six-part typology, categorizing different ways in which religious communicators and academics have tried to answer this question.

We can begin our proposed new typology with one of the oldest and most influential metaphors for the journalist: the *watchdog*. As a watchdog, the journalist stands guard over society, protecting the public interest by exposing secrets and raising the alarm. The watchdog journalist serves a crucial function for democracy by revealing the truth to the public about the most powerful members of society, including politicians and other elites. This role is often described as "the Fourth Estate," a term coined in 18th-century England (Donohue, Tichenor and Olien 1995, 118). This classic understanding is reflected in de Tocqueville's discussion of the importance of the press for American democracy (1840), and it can be seen in at least some contemporary discussions of religion and the media. In *Religion and the News* (Mitchell and Gower 2012), for example, former BBC journalist and religious affairs

correspondent Christopher Landau draws on the watchdog tradition when he defines “the news” as “something that somebody somewhere would rather was not made public knowledge” (Landau 2012, 80). The essential quality of journalism, for Landau, is the revealing of secrets for the benefit of the public.

Theorists of journalism have long debated how accurate and realistic the watchdog metaphor actually is. Larry Sabato’s (1991) classic history of US journalism argues that different approaches to power have dominated at different times, including long periods of *lapdog journalism* in which the press refrained from subjecting politicians to any critical scrutiny. Instead of serving the public, the lapdog press works on behalf of those in power, ensuring that their messages and perspectives are communicated without challenge.

References to lapdog journalism are relatively rare in studies of religion and the news. Observers are much more likely to describe competition and suspicion between religious organizations and journalists, rather than a master-servant relationship. In the USA, for example, Lynn Schofield Clark and Jill Dierberg (2012, 98) apply the watchdog and lapdog dichotomy to journalistic relationships with political power, but argue that by the 1920s mainstream journalism had already “firmly aligned itself with modernism and science and against conventional Christian religion” (Clark and Dierberg 2012, 101).

In other parts of the world, however, the lapdog metaphor has remained relevant. Journalists in some regions, countries and time periods have found it necessary to avoid criticizing religious leaders. One example can be found in Susie Donnelly and Tom Inglis’s (2010) study of media reporting of clerical child sex abuse in Ireland. It was only late in the 20th century, they argue, that the media in Ireland “began to investigate and interrogate religious personnel and, in playing its role as the Fourth Estate, replaced the Catholic Church as the social conscience and moral guardian of Irish society” (Donnelly and Inglis 2010, 1). Donnelly and Inglis (2010, 1) attribute this shift in part to secularization, through which “the influence of the Catholic Church over the media has declined. It is no longer able to limit, let alone control what media organizations do or say.” The Irish media were once content to function as a lapdog for the Church and only began operating as a watchdog after escaping from Church control.

George Donohue, Phillip Tichenor and Clarice Olien propose a more active, conflict-seeking *guard dog* model of journalism. Unlike the watchdog, the guard dog serves “as a sentry not for the community as a whole, but for those particular groups who have the power and influence to create and control their own security systems” (Donohue, Tichenor and Olien 1995, 116). Instead of the lazy subservience of the lapdog, the guard dog press works busily to protect special interest groups or dominant community groups and their power structures from threats and intruders.

We can see traces of this idea at work in discussions of religion and the news, too. Former *Times* religious affairs correspondent Ruth Gledhill points out that in the UK until relatively recently “most religious affairs correspondents had been clergy” (Gledhill 2012, 90), reporting religious news from a perspective of personal faith commitment, religious training and often religious employment. “If they were not actually preaching to the converted,” Gledhill (2012, 91) observes, “they were nevertheless covering the subject in a way which presumed a degree of specialist knowledge among their readership.” Just like the guard dog journalist, the traditional religious affairs correspondent worked on behalf of a special group in society, reporting their interests and criticizing a few deviant individuals without challenging the basic commitments and structures of the protected community.

We can also see other visions at work in discussions of religion and the press, and we can use these to start expanding the typology beyond these familiar models of journalism studies.

The first and most important is the widespread idea that journalists are simply uneducated about religion, an idea we have already encountered above. To continue the canine metaphor, we can name this the *puppy dog* theory of journalism. As we have seen, many religious and academic commentators argue that journalists need to develop religious literacy in order to function as competent communicators about religion. In *On Islam*, for example, Hilary Kahn (2018, 5) offers “to help journalists and media scholars to become more familiar with Islam and its believers” and to provide “the skills, knowledge, and attitudes they need to tackle the harmful misunderstandings about Islam that permeate public sentiment” (Kahn 2018, 6). The *puppy dog* theory argues that journalists are not malevolent or ill-intentioned in their reporting, but simply need training and guidance to encourage good behavior. Former BBC Director-General Mark Thompson proposed a similar argument in a controversial lecture in 2008: “accusations and grievances often fly back and forth” between journalists and religious communities, he admitted, but “one cannot help thinking it may be more a matter of misunderstanding than malice” (quoted in Wooley 2012, 62).

Another common approach argues that journalists should not take all the blame for the supposed underreporting or misreporting of religion. This approach argues that it is unrealistic to demand high standards of religious literacy and specialist knowledge from journalists – particularly when such standards are not required in other areas, like business or science journalism (Beckett 2016, 101). Instead, it should be the responsibility of religious organizations themselves to learn to communicate their messages in the right way, so that journalists can recognize those messages as newsworthy and use them in the production of publishable news stories. We can call this the *working dog* theory of journalism. The working dog journalist is not ignorant: They are highly trained and competent professionals, doing a particular job in a particular way. Anyone who wants to build a productive relationship with a working dog needs to undergo their own training, in order to learn what the animal can do, what it will respond to and what signals and skills are needed to support effective collaboration.

The working dog theory proposes that religious organizations need to recognize and respect the expertise of journalists and focus on developing their own knowledge, skills and experience in order to work with them more effectively. The Muslim sources interviewed by Michael Munnik (2018) are keen to develop greater media literacy and Xenia Zeiler’s (2018) study of Rajan Zed shows how effective a good understanding of the media’s needs and interests can be. Christopher Landau (2012, 85) argues that “it’s not just the media that need to change” and points out that if religious organizations hope for better engagement with the media, “it is essential that they themselves have a greater degree of literacy about those with whom they are seeking to build relationships.” The relative media success of many fringe groups, he points out, is due not only to the inexperience of journalists but to their own confidence and persistence in communicating newsworthy messages to news producers. To improve their coverage, mainstream organizations need to learn from their example.

The puppy dog and working dog theories are essentially optimistic, promising that problems of religious misrepresentation can be solved through education and training. Not all observers share this generous interpretation and our final theory is much more critical. We can name this the *hunting dog* theory of journalism. The true purpose of the hunting dog journalist is not just to protect the public (the watchdog theory), to serve its masters (the lapdog theory) or to protect a special interest group (the guard dog theory); the hunting dog is not interested in religious education classes (the puppy dog theory) or a well-crafted press release (the working dog theory). Instead, the hunting dog journalist deliberately seeks opportunities to attack their chosen prey. Monwar Hussain and Catherine Pepinster both

suggest that at least parts of the press harbor particular bias against certain groups, arguing that journalists exclusively, excessively and deliberately associate Islam with terrorism (Hussain 2012, 131) and Catholicism with sexual abuse (Pepinster 2012, 113). While both authors agree that such topics are newsworthy and must be reported, they claim that the media force this framing even onto unrelated stories, encouraging the public to exaggerate the scale of the problem within religious communities. Adherents to the hunting dog theory will have little use for religious literacy training, because they believe that journalists are not simply misinformed; they may even be aware that their stories are factually in error. The problem of media bias is much harder to fix.

This section has proposed a six-part typology of understandings of the nature of journalism, combining three ideas from journalism studies (the watchdog, lapdog and guard dog) with three new categories representing key debates over religion and the news (the puppy dog, working dog and hunting dog). Each theory of journalism posits a different kind of opportunity or challenge to religious organizations. For example, should religious organizations welcome the media's criticisms as cause for moral self-reflection (watchdog model), try to control and silence media critique (lapdog) or try to persuade the media to recognize them as a significant audience to be treated with respect (guard dog)? Is it more important for religious organizations to address media ignorance (puppy dog model), improve their own communication skills (working dog model) or draw attention to media bias (hunting dog model)?

These are not mutually exclusive or competing models, but alternative visions that may be combined in different ways in different contexts. Different religious organizations operate in different social, religious and geographical locations, facing different cultural pressures and experiencing different kinds of media coverage. Researchers interested in religion and the news need to pay more attention to the complex blends of attitudes and responses we encounter in different religious organizations, asking what these groups see as the role and function of journalism and how their perceptions influence their media strategy.

The final part of this chapter attempts to demonstrate some of this diversity by introducing three interviews with religious communication specialists. Each interviewee represents a different religious group, with different levels of media capital and a different strategy for winning attention. As we shall see, each represents a combination of some or all of the six approaches, but they differ in which aspect they choose to emphasize.

Journalism and the Church of England: first case study

My first interviewee, Anna Drew, has worked in church communications in the UK for almost 15 years. She began work as a Media and Information Assistant for the national Methodist Church, was promoted to Lead Media Officer where she "took the lead in liaising with the media on behalf of the church,"¹ and then moved in 2015 to become Director of Communications for a diocese (one of 42 administrative regions) in the Church of England. Canterbury is the see of Archbishop Justin Welby, the most important figure in the international Anglican Communion, and Drew's role now includes working as his local press officer.

As Lead Media Officer for the Methodist Church, Drew spent much of her time on crisis management: "any time there was a crisis that involved Methodist Church anywhere in Great Britain, I would get the phone call." However, she describes her work as "primarily, kind of, trying to sell our good news stories," particularly through "campaigns on public issues." These campaigns were operated by a joint team involving several Protestant denominations: the Methodists, the Baptists, the United Reformed Church and later the Church

of Scotland. As an example, Drew mentions a campaign working to challenge government policy by commissioning reports to uncover “the lies they tell in the media about people on benefits, you know, they’re all [buying] flat screen TVs and drinking cider.” Drew’s role was to persuade journalists that these reports were newsworthy. That was not easy: “selling a good news church story to the national press is always pretty tough.”

Other media projects were more experimental:

We were the first national church to get podcasting, and that happened because my boss said to me have you ever done any podcasting? When I was a couple of weeks in, and I said no. And he said, do you wanna try? And I said yeah. And we just did it.

When I asked why it was important for the Methodist Church to engage with the national media, scandal is the first issue Drew highlights: “if you’re handling crises, it’s better that you’re present in the story than absent.” More broadly, she argues, while “engagement with the media is never an end in itself,” “good communications pay off. It’s a basic principle. If you communicate with people, if you’ve got good news stories to tell, it’s worth it.” The denomination hoped “to demonstrate that here was a church that still had a cause, that still had a vision, that still had life and was making a huge difference in its communities in all kinds of ways.”

The Church of England is a larger religious organization with more resources and a less centralized approach to media. Each diocese has its own communications officer and strategy. In Canterbury, Drew explains, media work focuses less on campaigns than on stories: “we’ve got news stories we can tell about food banks, about community hubs, about church communities that have grown up out of groups of marginalized people.” To turn one of these activities into something the media will cover, Drew says, “you have to imagine it in the outlet, you have to imagine where it will end up and then work back.” “You have to think through who’s going to be interested in this, how does it fit their particular agenda,” and then craft the story idea and presentation to fit.

Drew’s approach to selling stories draws on her long experience and extensive networks in the media industry and she peppers our conversation with references to the interests and careers of specific journalists and broadcasters. Her exact approach can vary: “if it’s a story that doesn’t need much effort behind it, so a journalist can just pick up the press release and run with it as it is, then I prep a press release,” although it would also be crucial to “make sure we’ve got some good images to accompany it.” For a more high-profile story, “if I’m looking to sell it nationally, I might do some serious research about which particular correspondents would cover a particular story,” building up lists for each campaign. At the same time, the specific needs of the religious press have to be considered:

You’ve got to bear in mind that your heartland as a church press officer is the Christian press, so make sure they see it coming, make sure you’re mindful of their deadlines. For example, Christian press in terms of print publications tends to be weekly, or monthly or quarterly if we’re looking further afield, so don’t put a press release out on a Wednesday afternoon if you want The Church Times to pick it up, because they’re going to print at that moment. So make sure you get the easy wins, and then work to get the harder ones.

National attention is sometimes the goal, but Drew works most closely with local news. “The local news angle is really positive,” she explained, because “local newspapers are looking for

good news stories with nice pictures, they will bite your hand off.” Local news is “really important in terms of what we do”:

Being able to speak into those communities, having a voice in those newspapers, being able to demonstrate that we are doing good things, as I said with the Methodist Church, it demonstrates that we care about our community, that we are current, that we have something to offer.

At the same time, Drew suggests that local journalists now cover so many beats that “religious literacy generally is pretty low,” particularly for younger, less experienced journalists “who are less likely to have a frame of reference in relation to the church.” This can mean that the Church has to offer “a bit of help” to make sure the nuance of a religious story is fully understood.

The widespread adoption of social media has in some ways impacted Drew’s work. She notes that digital connectivity “speeds everything up,” forcing journalists to publish more quickly and leaving the Church open to unexpected public controversies. Nonetheless, Drew is adamant that the sharing of news through digital media could never replace professional journalism. Her argument in defense of journalism draws heavily on the *watchdog* model:

It’s about trusting your sources and stuff, we always need independent reporting. It’s an essential part of democratic society. [...] Journalism both holds us to account and advocates for us, I think. [...] When you are the Established Church, as the Church of England is, it’s even more important, really, that someone is there holding us to account. [...] We need good journalism, whatever the platform, and while I would love it if people would just Hoover up all the good stuff we put out there, it’s not an honest society really, if that’s the only option.

Journalism and the Coptic Orthodox Church: second case study

My second interviewee, Anba Angaelos, has been a bishop in the Coptic Orthodox Church in Britain since 1999. He became the first Coptic Archbishop of London in 2017. His personal website (BishopAngaelos.org 2013) lists a raft of awards and roles, including involvement in dialogue between Christian churches, dialogue between Christians and Muslims and patronage of charities focused on the Middle East.

In our interview, Archbishop Angaelos claims that “I never set out to engage with media.”² Instead, “the relationship has been quite gradual,” driven in part by the urgent need of journalists for reliable insight into the religious situation in Egypt and the Middle East. He initially began using Twitter in 2010 to publish a daily theological reflection, but when “things started to happen in Egypt, and Coptic Christians were particularly targeted, [...] we then started to get questions from online and mainstream media.” Over time, he explains, “slowly but surely I think we built up a sense of credibility in the eyes of media sources, and they started to take on our statements, and it then developed from there, being approached by various people to comment.”

According to Angaelos, his media credibility also relies on the careful, measured and balanced tone of his communications. His advocacy for religious freedom, for example, wins attention because “it’s not just the tribal message for our own, but a general message across the board, of what it means to be a free human being and a person who’s allowed to choose.”

While the message is for everyone, Angaelos justifies the communication principles of balance and calm within the theological resources of the Christian tradition:

The message of Christianity to me is one of hope and strength and resilience, but it's also one of truth and honesty, and I feel that even that truth and that honesty need to be done with a level of grace and respect. And that's the balance we try to maintain [...] I think people can work through that, rather than dealing with extreme emotional outbursts, or a sense of brokenness or a sense of, I think, uncontrolled anger, it's that mix that I think people appreciate.

Angaelos' enthusiasm for the media is blended with caution. His Church has been misrepresented in British and international media, he explains, although he would only give examples off the record. In his opinion, these mistakes are "often just out of ignorance or a lack of sufficient research. I don't think any of it is particularly intentional" – although, he then admitted, in some cases he did feel that mistakes had been made deliberately. Nonetheless, even accidental mistakes matter:

Here in the UK, sometimes if you put out something that is not so precise, it may be a little bit annoying, but doesn't have any long-term effect in most cases. Whereas in situations like our own, as a numeric minority in a majority Muslim area [...] if we are misquoted or misrepresented it could actually be quite literally life-threatening.

To improve the accuracy of representations of religion, journalists, reporters and producers should be "taking the time to do their research and reaching out to legitimate sources before putting things out." As his own media credibility increases, he feels that instances of inaccuracy are "probably decreasing, because people now have an avenue, they know where to come and who to go to, and they can, if they care to, get some precise details and information that is true."

Meanwhile, social media is central to Angaelos' communication strategy. "Mainstream media wouldn't be remotely interested in what I do on a daily basis," he argues: His church is unfamiliar to British audiences and his daily routine of meetings is rarely newsworthy. Through social media, in contrast, he now has followers "who may never have heard of the Coptic Orthodox Church" or "may never have had a proper way in to reach the Orthodox Church to know who we are and what we stand for and what we have to say." Social media "gives me an ability to share the things that I feel are important to share with people" and that "gives people a little bit of an insight into what I do and what we do as a church and what we hope to be in our very varied world."

Archbishop Angaelos also perceives some limitations and dangers in online communication. Social media brings increased visibility:

there are, you know, billions of critics out there now, and something one does or one says or the way one acts can be picked up and commented on, and so it's very important to realize that we're always in the public sphere.

This demands greater standards of honesty, but it also facilitates new kinds of deception:

People find it acceptable to take clips and captions out of context and put them up in certain ways. So there is also that concern, of everyone being potential journalists and everyone being able to take anything and put it up in any way they choose.

Journalism and the Muslim Council of Britain: third case study

My final interviewee takes a completely different approach to the media and its representation of his religious community. Since 2016, Miqdaad Versi has recorded each reference to Islam in the British media. He fact-checks each story and submits a formal complaint if he finds an inaccuracy. This project began as a personal mission and is now funded by charitable grants to support paid staff members as part of the overall mission of the Muslim Council of Britain, where Versi's previous role was as Assistant Secretary General. The MCB was founded in 1997 and is now the largest Muslim umbrella organization in the UK, with over 500 affiliated bodies (MCB 2018a). Its website lists the Centre for Media Monitoring run by Versi as one of its nine core projects (MCB 2018b).

The Guardian has described Miqdaad Versi's work as "a quixotic – and always scrupulously courteous – campaign against the endless errors and distortions in news about British Muslims" (Subramanian 2018). It is also, in Versi's own account, highly successful. Each inaccurate news item is addressed first with a complaint directly to the news source. If that is unsuccessful, Versi then submits a formal complaint to the *Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO)*. IPSO is the UK's main regulator of the press, established in 2014 to adjudicate complaints from members of the public. It operates independently but is funded by member publishers. By the time of our interview, Versi could claim to have received IPSO complaints committee rulings in his favor "more times than any other individual in the country."³ This record of success is based on intimate familiarity with the complaints process: "I understand how it all works inside out," he claimed, "I am well attuned to what types of things are likely to win at the complaints committee and what aren't." In fact, he had begun submitting recommendations to IPSO to suggest ways to improve their complaints process.

According to Versi, the vision of the MCB's Centre for Media Monitoring "is to encourage responsible reporting about Islam and Muslims." Throughout our interview, Versi emphasizes the consequences of media coverage. Irresponsible reporting, Versi argues, is a fundamental betrayal of the media's social function:

I see the role of the media as a whole as to hold power to account, to inform and educate, and to report generally, but always in a responsible manner [...] If there is any topic that is consistently talked about, and the public misunderstands the context in which it is talked about, then there is a duty on the journalist to ensure that the reader or the listener or the viewer understands and is not misled by the reporting that takes place. I think that's the key thing for me.

Citing academic studies, Versi argues that the media is "creating an atmosphere of hostility against Muslims" in Britain by repeating, corroborating and amplifying anti-Muslim myths and stereotypes. This "huge failure of many media organizations, print and broadcast," he argues, has distorted public understanding of and attitudes toward Muslims and "played an important role in the rise of the far right."

Versi also diagnosed the causes of media error in our interview, differentiating between the key factors undermining accuracy in print and broadcast news. In British broadcast media, Versi identifies trust, balance and context as the key challenges. British broadcast news is trusted more highly by the public than print and, according to state regulations, must be impartial. However, news programs will frequently invite guests to discuss the headlines of the day. Too often, Versi argued, news programs attempt to find balance and provoke a

watchable conversation by inviting a representative of a controversial and extreme position on air, hoping that the program's presenter will be well informed and quick enough to explain who the interviewee is, put their views in context and challenge any inaccurate or prejudicial statements. In practice, this exposure tends to have three negative consequences:

[Far right extremists] firstly end up being normalized, second they end up saying a whole load of things which [...] often are anti-Muslim and aren't challenged, and thirdly the random guy in the audience ends up misled about who this individual is, what he represents and what he says in other platforms, because they see him on the BBC or Sky and therefore think of him as a reasonable character.

Versi argues that both Muslim extremists and anti-Muslim extremists are well aware of how much they can gain from appearing on television, even in a hostile interview. In this game of media exposure, he suggests, the media themselves have often been outwitted and outmaneuvered. One of Versi's examples is Anjem Choudary, imprisoned in the UK in 2016 for encouraging support of Islamic State:

Most journalists I have spoken to have admitted that the way that Anjem Choudary manipulated the media in his day was bad and did a disservice to the viewer. Because he would literally just call up every time something happened, he used to call them up and say the most controversial thing possible so he could get on TV. He built his network, he had no mosque, he had no Muslim institutions, he had no way of people knowing who he was, social media was there but it wasn't that big, he was basically a nobody. The only way he could become a somebody is because all these organizations, the media organizations, gave him a platform and then he was able to basically create al-Muhajiroun and these really quite disgusting groups because he knew how to play the media game, and the media was played by him.

For many British viewers, Versi argues, Choudary might have been the only Muslim they ever saw, encouraging them to use one individual to form their understanding of Islam as a whole.

In print journalism, Versi places more of the blame on journalists themselves. There are three causes of error, he proposes: the explicit bias of "people who have a very clear anti-Muslim perspective," the unconscious bias of people who have internalized false ideas about Islam and so are willing to believe and publish stories that anyone with direct experience of Muslims would consider highly implausible and the accidental errors committed by people who are "not doing due diligence" because of the pressure to publish quickly.

Each source of error requires a different solution. To address unconscious bias, Versi calls for "basic religious literacy and understanding," backed up by a greater willingness to "engage with the experts." Addressing the other kinds of error, however, requires "a stronger stick": increased penalties for newspapers and journalists who publish mistakes. When newspapers are forced to publish corrections, Versi suggests that social media companies could be required to ensure that everyone who was exposed to the original article via online sharing also gets to see the correction. When it comes to "agenda-driven journalism," "there needs to be greater accountability for journalists": individuals who make repeated errors should face consequences. Journalists who deliberately mislead the public by withholding information and misrepresenting Muslims are undermining the integrity of their whole profession: "They should be fired! I mean I'm sorry, this is the very basics of journalism."

Conclusion

As these interviews remind us, different religious organizations – at least in the UK – experience different levels of media awareness, interest and hostility and respond by deploying different financial and human resources to enhance their media presence. However, different organizations also develop different understandings of the role and function of the news. This understanding contributes to their perception of the specific opportunities and challenges presented to that organization by the media and the most effective solutions for achieving their media goals. Religious literacy training for journalists, for example, may seem like an attractive option to religious groups operating a *puppy dog* theory of journalism, but it seems an ineffective distraction to groups influenced by the *hunting dog* theory.

Anna Drew's approach reflects the *working dog* theory, developing and selling stories using her expert knowledge of editorial interests and publication cycles. Drew also stressed the value of the independent, professional press as the *watchdog* of society, with only a brief acknowledgment of the need to teach new *puppy dog* journalists a bit more about religious context and nuance. Drew's work benefits from a general public interest in, nostalgia for and positive attitude toward her Church, suggesting a residual relevance for the *guard dog* approach. While it might be hard to sell some of the messages her organization most wants to promote, Drew can still rely on journalists to be eager for good pictures and entertaining local stories.

Archbishop Angaelos operates in a very different situation, representing a minority church that few British journalists know much about. Angaelos has slowly established himself as a reliable and quotable expert source on newsworthy matters of international conflict and politics and uses this status to campaign for religious freedom. Like Drew, Angaelos adopts a *working dog* understanding of the press, developing his own skills as a media communicator and emphasizing the importance of accuracy, tone and audience for effective partnerships with journalists. These two interviews differ most strikingly in their understanding of journalistic error: While Drew made a light-hearted reference to journalists forgetting the difference between vicars and ministers, Angaelos argued from personal experience that media mistakes in the UK could endanger lives in his community in Egypt. Overall, he suggested, these mistakes were usually simple errors, made possible by inadequate research – a failure in the working practices of journalists.

Our third interviewee, Miqdaad Versi, was more openly critical. Our interview was filled with references to error-filled headlines, academic studies demonstrating media bias and the careers of particularly egregious offenders. Like Angaelos, Versi was convinced that media mistakes had real consequences, but Versi was more willing to invoke the *hunting dog* theory of deliberate and aggressive media bias and called for strong penalties and punishments to raise the standards of journalism. The *watchdog* theory did feature briefly in our interview, but Versi moved on quickly to emphasize the importance of accurate media representation for public education. Versi's approach to the *working dog* theory of journalism leaves space for competition between journalists and sources: Individual communicators had at times outwitted media producers, using their programs to promote extremist Muslim and anti-Muslim positions. Journalists, he argued, need to learn more about how to frame debates, challenge errors on air and produce news with positive social impact.

The three interviewees all agreed that social media allowed them to communicate directly with audiences and share perspectives excluded from mainstream media. Drew and Angaelos pointed out that social media made communication between journalists and religious experts much easier, and both expressed concern over their experiences of online criticism. There were also differences between the interviews, particularly over the impact of social media on

the role and function of journalism. Drew argued that social media was insufficient as a news source, suggesting that society would suffer if the watchdog role of the professional journalist was undermined. For Versi, in contrast, social media had a responsibility to act as a watchdog against the press, by drawing attention to errors and enforced corrections.

This chapter has argued that studies of religion and the news need to pay much more attention to what religious organizations think about journalism and the strategies those organizations are employing to get their messages into the mainstream news. Studies of media representations of religion are valuable, but they do not capture the kinds of work being done behind the scenes on behalf of religious organizations by media specialists like Drew, Angaelos and Versi. Religious organizations are trying to understand the media more deeply, training themselves to communicate more effectively and ultimately seeking to improve the accuracy, favorability and impact of their media representation. More and larger studies of independent and organization-sponsored religious communicators, including studies in different world regions not reflected in this present chapter, will be needed before we can begin to understand the full complexity of the relationship between religious organizations, religious entrepreneurs and the news media.

Notes

- 1 Anna Drew, 2018. *Interview*. Interviewed by Tim Hutchings [Telephone], 13 June.
- 2 Archbishop Anba Angaelos, 2018. *Interview*. Interviewed by Tim Hutchings [Telephone], 11 May.
- 3 Miqdaad Versi, 2019. *Interview*. Interviewed by Tim Hutchings [Telephone], 18 January.

Further readings

Mitchell, J. and Gower, O., eds., 2012. *Religion and the News*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited.

This edited collection brings together academics, journalists and religious communicators to share different perspectives on religious news. Essays are diverse and provocative, making this an excellent text for class discussion.

Munnik, M., 2017. From Voice to Voices: Identifying a Plurality of Muslim Sources in the News Media. *Media, Culture & Society*, 39(2), 270–281.

In this study of Muslim communities in Glasgow, Michael Munnik identifies a recent shift in how Muslims appear in the news, away from an old gatekeeper model in which one voice is expected to speak for the whole community toward a new diversity of representation. Very few research projects have tried to examine the work that religious individuals and organizations do in order to win the attention of journalists, so this is a groundbreaking study.

Street, J., 2011. *Mass Media, Politics and Democracy*. 2nd ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

This textbook introduces key approaches to journalism and politics, including (particularly in Chapter 7) a discussion of the classic metaphors of watchdog and lapdog journalism.

Zeiler, X., 2018. Digital Journalistic Uses of the Terms “sacred” and “trivial”: Online Press Releases on Portrayals of Hindu Deities in the USA. *Religion, Media and Digital Culture*, 8(3), 300–319.

Xenia Zeiler’s study of Rajan Zed and the Universal Society of Hinduism analyzes a corpus of press releases to explore how a religious minority can win publicity and drive the media agenda. Where Munnik examines diverse voices in one region, Zeiler examines diverse discourses and tactics used by one individual.

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