

KEY WORDS IN THE STUDY OF MEDIA AND RELIGION

MEDIA

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The term “media”¹ in the study of media and religion may be understood in either a focused and specific way or a more expansive and discursive way. Understanding this difference is important in making sense of the development of the study of media and religion and also of the different perspectives that become apparent in approaches to writing and research in the area. Both have particular strengths and limitations.

The interest in media as an area of study can be traced back to the U.S. in the 1920’s, when the relatively new mass communication technologies of newspapers, film and radio were assembling large audiences, giving them the potential to influence social behavior on a mass scale that wasn’t possible in previous times. Anecdotal evidence about the effects of Nazi propaganda in Europe and the desire to understand how these new media could be harnessed for political and commercial purposes lead to an interest in more accurate information about media uses and effects. The dominant methodologies of research for these investigations were the relatively new but influential social and behavioral sciences.

In line with the scientific preference for clear definition, media in this paradigm were understood primarily as the recognized utilities of mass communication, such as

newspapers, magazines, film, radio and later television. Reflecting the scientific concerns to understand phenomena in terms primarily of causes and effects, media communication was understood as a linear process: a sender constructed a message, that message was fed into media technologies which multiplied and distributed it to a widely scattered mass audience, where it worked its effect. Research was directed primarily towards isolating and measuring the particular contribution made by each stage of that process to the final outcome. Whether the communication was effective or not was evaluated according to whether the effects intended by the communicator were achieved (such as change in attitudes, voting for a particular politician, or buying a particular product).

This narrowly focused view of media and the communication process has been and continues to be an influential one, for a number of reasons. It corresponds to a common pragmatic way of thinking about how the world works and our part in it: things that happen are caused by something that make them happen - in turn, we can make things happen by finding out what causes them to happen and doing that ourselves. The perception of scientific methodologies as objective lent an aura of impartiality to research findings around media effect that belied their particular focus and limitations. The approach also has an adaptable simplicity. Forget about complex media theory: communication is simply a process, media are just tools - learn how they work, adopt the right techniques, and you can make things work to your own advantage. Studying media by focusing on individual media as tools of effect also avoided involving researchers and institutions in the politically-loaded critical issues of things like media power, ownership and social functions.

Though many aspects and limitations of the approach have been questioned in recent decades, the hermeneutical power and practical applications of this focused way of thinking about media have made it an enduring way of thinking about media, particularly in areas such as policy making and strategic media planning to the present time, leading Denis McQuail to call it “the dominant paradigm” in media theory (McQuail, 1994).

This approach has been the most common framework for scholarly research into media and religion until recently, particularly in the U.S. That research has focused on a number of main issues: describing and tracking religious interactions with media; critical comparisons of media content and values from the perspective of religious content and values; and studies of the effects of religious uses of media, looking at such things as audiences of religious programs, uses of religious programs by audiences, effectiveness of religious programs in such things as evangelism and attitude change, and strategies of various religious uses of media.

These studies into media and religion reflect a number of unquestioned assumptions about what media are, what religion is, and how the two are related. Religion is seen as a separate domain of human experience from that of media and the media world. Religious meaning was generated and governed primarily by religious people according to their own distinctive religious criteria and principles. Media were simply instruments or channels for carrying this religiously determined message to the intended audience. Whether a religious communication was effective or not was evaluated by the extent to which the changes in behavior intended by the communicator happened or not.

This focused way of thinking about media as instruments began to change in the latter part of the twentieth century, for a number of reasons. Sustained and unresolved debate

about the relationship between viewed media violence and social violence in the U.S. in the 1960's and 1970's created a skepticism, even disillusionment in some, about the capacity of scientific research alone to fully resolve and predict media effects and many researchers went looking for alternative ways of thinking about media and human behavior. There was a growing appreciation of the fact that the recognized mass media were just one part of a much wider process of social mediation within which all humans are nurtured, and the need for thinking about media to include a broader understanding of mediated communication became apparent. There was a growing awareness that media were not just neutral channels for carrying information and messages, but had their own character which infused the message along with the overt content - media had effects apart from those intended by the communicator that needed consideration. Within this ferment, approaches in European media studies, with a focus on such things as text and meaning, media and ideology, media audiences and media as agents of cultural construction began to be taken up across the Atlantic. This convergence of factors lead to a broadening of the concept of media which began to change how the relationship between media and religion was understood.

This more discursive view moves away from a focus on specific effects of individual media towards a view of the whole society or culture as a mediated phenomenon to which all forms of media contributed. Within this view, thinking about media and religion moves away from a narrowly focused concern with how religious organizations use specific media and the effects they achieve, to looking more broadly at religion as a mediated phenomenon within the context of the wider culture of mediation.

A discursive approach is undergirded by a quite different worldview to the modernist, scientific view. It sees various descriptions of reality not as objective reflections of what exists, but as constructed, mediated views which carry with them the particular interests of those who hold them and which contend with other constructions for social recognition and access to social resourcing. Media are now understood not as individual instruments to be studied on their own, but as part of the dynamic of society itself, a mediated reality comprising not just technological media of mass communication, but the total process of mediation of life. Given the interrelatedness of these cultural processes, media should be understood not as instruments carrying a fixed message but as sites where construction, negotiation and reconstruction of cultural meaning takes place in an ongoing process of maintenance and change of cultural structures, relationships, meanings and values.

In recent years, therefore, scholarly interest in media and religion has shifted away from understanding how religious groups use media, how media represent religion, or how the values of media and religious bodies intersect, to questions of religion as a mediated phenomenon. The theological view of religion as a separate realm of knowledge and practice governed by its own criteria, or the institutional view of religion defined by authorized religious bodies, are challenged by this approach. Religion is more accurately understood as a social construction that originates, develops and adapts itself through the same mediated processes of creation, conflict and negotiation within itself and in relation to its wider environment that all of life participates in. The study of media and religion therefore needs to be broadened to include the messy, diverse and at times contradictory individual and group practices of mediated daily life to which religious meanings are ascribed.

Key questions now become, not how does religion use media, but how are media and religion inter-related? How is what we know as religion constructed, shaped, practiced and transformed by the different media practices within which it is embodied? While the dominant agents of religion within any society – such as religious leaders, religious institutions, and organized belief and practice systems - are important to study, the more discursive view sees these identifiable manifestations of religion as just some of the players in a much broader game of social religious mediation that includes many other players, playing to quite different sets of rules that need to be deciphered and correlated.

This is not to say that the instrumental paradigm is not still used in research on media and religion. As with other areas of media study, particularly in marketing and advertising applications, the view of media as instruments for carrying particular messages and the testing and measurement of the effectiveness of specific uses of media to achieve particular outcomes in religious marketing, promotion and institution building are still widely used.

The strength of the discursive way of thinking about media and religion, however, is that it more realistically considers the complexity of religious practice and mediation processes within any social or cultural situation and how such media uses construct the character of religion as religion adapts itself to them. The weakness is that with such a broad view of social mediation and of religion, its rich description can be so diffuse as to be of little strategic or policy value. In practice, however, one can see a number of key metaphors of media reoccurring in this approach.

Media as Culture

The metaphor of media as culture presents the understanding of medium as the ecology within which organisms grow. We become who we are through nurture within a mediated

social environment which provides us not only with the practical necessities for physical survival and growth but also with resources of symbols and practices for building insight, meaning, and coherence in human understanding. We are not simply autonomous, independent individuals - we are first and foremost mediated beings. Our physical, social and verbal environments are inseparable.

Significant development in rethinking media as culture took place within Britain during the 1960s and 1970s, particularly through the work of Stuart Hall. Hall broke from the established understandings of culture as the epitome of elite Enlightenment civilization and began looking at culture as people's everyday lives, redressing earlier elite views with studies of the cultures of the working classes. Influenced by the critical perspectives of Marxism, Hall conceptualized the dynamics of culture as conflicts or struggles between forces of domination and subordination. Other cultural approaches have emphasized more the dynamics of consensus and how groups who share a similar language and interests work together to build meaning within the larger system. In the U.S., James Carey, for instance, argued for approaching the study of media from the perspective of how media serve as ritual performances for maintaining the integration of culture (Carey, 1989).

Approaches to thinking about media as culture depart from earlier anthropological understandings of culture as something relatively fixed, identifiable and stable that is simply handed down and reproduced from one generation to the next. Rather human cultures are seen as diverse, relatively fluid, dynamic associations that are constantly being modified and reconstructed through ongoing challenge, contest and negotiation between different power centres that form and reform in institutions, groups, sub-groups and individuals. Patterns of mediation can be important markers in the formation and identity

of cultural and sub-cultural groups, providing the cultural web or framework upon which interaction occurs.

The concept of media as culture likewise challenges the view of religious cultures as stable, reified structures of meaning embodied in hierarchies or structures that have evolved in a “natural” process of development. The coherence of religious cultures and subcultures is constantly being negotiated and built through communication, cultural, material and political interests that work in an ongoing movement towards both stabilization and change.

The view of media as culture also challenges the perception that the nature of religiosity in a society is best understood through the lens of its authorized expressions. The opinions of the institutional religious elite are seen as just one opinion among many, gaining greater power in many cases through their domination of the processes of mediation within the religion, or through correspondence of their religious media preferences with the dominant cultures of mediation within the broader culture.

Thinking about media from a cultural perspective prompts a number of questions: What are the authorized and unauthorized views within any religious tradition and in what ways are those views associated with or embodied in particular media practices? In what ways are established power structures and practices within a religion challenged by their adaptation into other cultures of mediation? In what ways do people within or outside particular religious traditions adapt aspects of the mediated religious language, practices or symbols in their own processes of religious meaning making?

Media as Industries

The most common use of the term “The Media” today is as a collective term for the constellation of institutions, practices, economic structures, and aesthetic styles of social utilities such as newspapers, movies, radio, book publishers and television and the related creative industries (such as advertising, marketing, and graphic design) that service them.

Because every form of mediated communication is a social activity, every medium requires a supporting social infrastructure in order to function. You cannot write and send a letter to someone, for example, unless you have materials to write with, there is a way for the letter to get there, and the person you’re writing to knows how to read or has access to someone who does. Every new medium that is developed, therefore, must develop a supporting social infrastructure or industry before it can function as an effective social medium. This industrial infrastructure includes a common language, language forms or literacies appropriate to the new medium; a means of education or induction to pass on those literacies to new generations; a steady and reliable supply of materials and technologies needed by the medium (e.g. sheepskin, marsh reeds, cotton or wood pulp paper for writing, printing presses, ink and plenty of paper, roads for distribution and sellers for selling for mass print, etc.); a framework of protocols, legal regulations and policy structures for managing the integration of the new practices and new centres of power into existing societies.

Without these industrial factors being present, no medium will become established as a sustainable form of communication within a society. Once established, however, the industry becomes a new centre of power. Its new literacies challenge established epistemologies, structures of language and ways of seeing the world. New communication practices challenge and change existing social networks and structures built around old

practices. Its new leaders can displace old leaders whose power was based in old media practices. Investigation into how media are organized and function as industries has been an important area of study over the past five decades because of the significant power that media have come to exercise in modern states.

The character of media as industries have significant implications for how media and religion is conceptualized and studied. The ability of religious bodies to communicate their message and perspectives to the wider society is influenced significantly by the extent to which they can translate the language and practices of the religion, constructed within particular media-cultural contexts, into the required languages, industrial demands and cultures of the dominant media industries. Conversely the development of new languages and practices of new media can generate new expressions and practices of religion.

The ability of religious bodies to adapt their message or practices to form mutually beneficial relationships or economic alignments with developing media industries have been significant factors in some key shifts within religion, such as the alignment between Martin Luther and the printers in the early 16th century Christianity (Edwards, 1994, Eisenstein, 1979) and more recently the ability of Evangelical Christianity to adapt more readily to the dramatic, commodified marketing requirements of electronic media (Clark, 2007, Horsfield, 1984, Moore, 1994). Changes in media industries may also affect social structures by changing the preferences of social mediation in a way that privileges particular expressions of religion rather than others.

Thinking of media as industries prompts a number of other questions in the study of media and religion. In what ways do the signifying systems of particular media industries serve particular ideologies that may support or challenge religious ideologies? In what

ways do the economic structures and requirements of media industries require religious institutions to restructure in order to participate in them? How do the professional ideologies and work practices of those who work in the media affect other social institutions and practices that engage with them, such as religion? How have socio-political factors such as ownership of media technologies, access to media, and power centres created by media industries shaped the culture and distribution of power within religious institutions?

Media as Text

The only way we can make sense of the world is through the use of language and language can only operate through texts of mediation. A major approach to thinking about media, therefore, has been through the theorisation and study of texts and textual practice. In a discursive approach, this involves more than just deciphering overt content. In its broadest use, a media text is any signifying structure that uses cultural signs and codes to convey or evoke shared meaning. In these broader terms, religious understanding and practice can be sustained only in texts, so an important aspect of understanding the relationship of media and religion involves the study of texts and textual practices in the construction and communication of religious meaning. This meaning is not an objective thing waiting to be discovered and explained. It is constructed socially through the agency of signs, not in an arbitrary nor naturalistic way, but within traditions of textual practice involving groups and individuals cooperating and competing to build shared and divergent understanding. This process is a constantly moving one, involving the full gamut of textual practice such as codes,² myths,³ discourses,⁴ genres,⁵ intertextuality,⁶ symbolic capital,⁷ and the life of the text in circulation.

While the instrumental view of media emphasized the power the medium gives to the producer or the one who controls the instrument, the textual approach views media power in a more distributive way. Understandings, positions and relationships in a media situation are neither fixed nor simple. Studies of how audiences receive and use media within the textual tradition see audiences as active agents in the process of communication and in the construction of meaning, not just as passive recipients. For some, this more fluid view of communication as a negotiated outcome between production and reception means that we have to change our concept of “media” away from just the physical artefact (such as a book, radio or television) and see media instead as the physical and mental space of interaction between the person producing the message within a particular media form, the media form itself, and what the person who receives the communication does with it, with the individual “reading” that is generated by the individual becoming a new text itself (Lewis, 2005, p.6).

Looking at media and religion in this way significantly challenges the idea of religious authority that is assumed in the instrumentalist approach, where media texts are seen as powerful tools that enhance the power of those who have access to use them. In the textual approach, media still have power, and those who have access to use media have their power enhanced, but that power is not absolute. Power arises from a complex cultural interaction and negotiation between producers of messages, the texts of the messages, and those who receive and use the messages. The power of communication and of religious leadership is not as an absolute power to impose one’s meanings on others. Religious authority arises from effective interaction and negotiation of ideas and meaning between producers and users of texts.

The metaphor of media as text has been an influential one within Christianity. Christianity is a text-based religion with a strong sense that its defining beliefs and values are to be found in historically mediated texts. There are, however, diverse and conflicting opinions about what those “texts” are and how the correct ideas and meanings are to be derived from those texts. The opinions range across a continuum, from a narrow fundamentalist textual objectivity which sees particular written scriptural documents (now printed) as culturally unconditioned writings dictated by God and true in all areas of knowledge for all time, to an extreme post-structuralist approach which sees written Christian texts as de-authored, ideology-riven historical documents that need radical critical deconstruction and creative reconstruction.

The rise of the empirical sciences in the late 19th and early 20th centuries created an impetus among some thinkers within Christian churches to apply scientific methods to establish objectively the historical reliability of Christianity’s founding texts, particularly the texts of scripture. This concern with text, however, was limited to particular concerns. As Gamble noted in the early 1990’s, the huge research effort of the 19th and 20th centuries in biblical studies was largely directed to establishing “the contents of documents, their chronological and theological matrices, and similar questions.” (Gamble, 1995, pp. ix, 42) Broader issues of text from a media perspective, such as questions of production, sponsorship, circulation, ownership and use of books, he suggests, have been significantly neglected.

Changed perspectives on the nature of text and textual practice open a range of new possibilities for rethinking the interaction of media and religion: how do texts function and exercise power in the construction and mediation of religious ideas, practices, and

institutional life; how do texts function in the creation or restriction of diversity in religious ideas and experience; how do texts and textual practice contribute to the building of religious coherence and identity; where does authority lie in the interpretation of texts and what are the implications of reader reception theory for religious authority; how are religious texts performed and in what ways is their performance part of their meaning construction?

Media as Technologies

The concept of media as technologies looks at media technologies, not just as neutral carriers of content, but as having particular physical, social and technological characteristics which become an integral part of the communication. One of the earliest to propose this perspective was the Canadian economist, Harold Innis, in the late 1940's and early 1950's (Innis, 1950, Innis, 1951). Innis' ideas were built on and popularized by his colleague at the University of Toronto, Marshall McLuhan.

The focus on media as technologies challenged the dominant instrumental thinking of the time which, it was argued, missed the vital issue of the technological and sensory characteristics of the medium and the way those characteristics structure communication and influence the society. The form of a medium massages the communication by favouring particular kinds of messages over others and by adding particular sensory preferences to the content. All communication therefore needs to be understood as "content-in-form" and, when push comes to shove, McLuhan argued, the form of a communication is of greater importance than the content, summed up in his adage, "the medium is the message."

McLuhan proposed that technologies of communication work by addressing and extending particular human senses and functions. In the process, the perceptions and

understandings that are linked to those senses are affected. When new technologies are developed and adopted within a society, therefore, they create broad new sensory experiences and consciousness, in the process changing the existing balance of sensory use and experience. These changes are subtle ones - changes in perceptual habits and ways of thinking brought by new forms of communication are massaged into a culture rather than dramatically imposed. The consequence, though, is that different mediations of phenomena create different perceptions of those phenomena within people, without the people necessarily being aware that their perceptions are different.

There are many criticisms, even scorn, of this approach to thinking about media. However, the metaphor of media as technologies has been important in breaking the dominance of the instrumentalist view for thinking about media. Its insights have been developed through more extended and nuanced explorations into the interaction of technology and society and the materiality of communication practice.

Without falling into a simple deterministic mindset, the metaphor provokes different questions in thinking about media and religion. In what ways do the presence and availability of particular media forms stimulate particular types of religious perception and practice compared to differently media religion, and what are the social consequences of that? In what ways do the sensory characteristics of the media by which communication takes place shape perception and legitimization of particular religious forms over others, and what are the social and political consequences of that? In what ways do particular media stimulate or require particular forms of social relationships and structures to be established or changed, and what are the consequences for religion of that? What are the relative contributions made in the construction of meaning by the content of a

communication and the form of its mediation? David Morgan, for example, suggests there is a difference between those types of media or forms of communication in which the content of the communication and the form of the communication are clearly distinguishable and others where the distinction between the two is blurred or deliberately blended. He argues that any mediation that makes one aware of its material nature transforms the mode of representation from a discursive one to a figurative one, engaging different tools of analysis. "When the medium materializes, when it begins to perform rather than defer, we become aware of it rather than through it... Meaning is 'in, with and under' the physical elements of the medium." (Morgan, 1998, pp. 4-5) In what ways do particular media forms establish organizational patterns or hierarchies in the social ordering of religious phenomena and in and perceptions of religious power and authority?

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¹ The term “media” is used variously in different places now as either a singular or plural term.

When the term “media” is used as a singular, it is most commonly as a collective term for all different media which together are seen as impacting upon societies. This use has the implicit ideological assumption that all media, though different, are basically one in the combined role they play in contemporary societies. I consider that the differences between different media are as significant as their commonality in understanding the nuanced way in which media function within any society. For that reason I will use the term “media” as a plural term to preserve that distinction. The term “medium” will be used when referring to an individual medium.

² Codes are wider systems of meaning held by a society or group that are incorporated within language, often as a sub-text of the communication, and accessed or triggered through different verbal or visual cues.

3 Myths are integrated narratives that organize and interpret reality for particular communities or groups. Along with conceptual theories, myths provide a mechanism for constructing and carrying a world-overview that integrates individual episodes and experiences in people's or groups' lives.

4 Discourses are characteristic patterns of statements, conventions or language use that construct representation in a way that reinforces the power interests of particular groups over others by enforcing particular "regimes of truth."

5 Genres are particular types of structured discourse or narrative that circulate within cultures. A genre generates particular expectations of a style of narrative or argument that become part of the construction of meaning through the process of consumption.

6 Inter-textuality refers to the process of incorporating within a particular text references or allusions to other texts that contribute to its meaning. Being able to detect or read the inter-textual references is one of the skills of cultural literacy – knowing how to read the culture - and can divide the audience into in-groups and out-groups.

7 Symbolic capital is the status or prestige ascribed to a person or persons by a group which gives them "the power to name (activities, groups), the power to represent commonsense and above all the power to create the 'official' version of the social world." (Mahar et al., 1990, p.13)