**Religion on an Ordinary Day: An International Study of News Reporting.**

*Introduction to the Project* by Lori Beaman

Print media, and in particular newspapers, remains an influential source of information for many people on a range of topics, including religion. Very often, though, scholarly attention has, like that of journalists, been focused on the sensational. But what if we were to consider the representation of religion on an ordinary day in any given newspaper. What might we see? How is religion imagined, constructed, reported and even ignored in newspapers and the daily life that they reflect? The *Religion on an Ordinary Day* project was inspired by these questions.

The project began as a collaboration between Kim Knott and Lori Beaman in the context of the Religion and Diversity Project, a Major Collaborative Research Initiative funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and with the support of an Economic and Social Research Council grant. Our initial research meeting in London, England, in 2013 brought together the scholars whose work appears in the pages that follow. From that meeting on, the project became a truly collaborative effort between all of the scholars involved, with ongoing research planning and results sharing meetings over the course of the next five years. The baton of the weight of the project was passed numerous times, and we are grateful to all of those who carried it, but most especially to Elizabeth Poole and Enqi Weng for carrying it across the finish line.

Together, we debated and agonized over questions like "what do we mean by religion?’ and ‘what do we count as religion?’ We strategized over how to capture the broadest possible understanding of religion on an ordinary day, including obituaries, advertisements, op-ed pieces and interpreting photographs. How did religious diversity intersect with media representations? How are public anxieties about religion reflected in the pages of newspapers? Are religious groups covered differently? What are the positive stories about religion and where do they appear? Were there stories that were covered synchronously by newspapers in each of our countries? We struggled with the fact that sometimes, it turned out, the day we had chosen rather randomly turned out to be much more than an ordinary day (the Scottish Referendum followed on 18 September, 2014, for example). Our geographic span included Australia, Canada, the UK, and Finland and we captured data from the same newspapers (national, regional and local) on three consecutive years—September 17 in 2013, 2014, and 2015. Every research project involves paths not taken, and this one is no exception. A different random date, expansion of the data capture years, shifts in what we counted as religion, and so on could have impacted our results. In the final analysis we could see that our approach was in fact novel and innovative and that it produced important insights into religion and the media.

The project drew on the expertise and energy of senior and emerging scholars, seeing retirements, promotions, doctoral defences and postdoctoral projects unfold during its course. We overcame linguistic challenges, disciplinary differences, time zone obstacles and the ever-present issue of overcommitment. The final result of our collaboration will, we hope, contribute to scholarship on media representations of religion in a global world and diverse societies.

*Introduction to this Special Issue*

By Elizabeth Poole and Enqi Weng

As Beaman indicates in her introduction to this project, studies of media representations of religion often focus on controversies (The Rushdie Affair for example) or significant events (such as the 2010 papal visit to the UK, Knott et al., 2013). This Special Issue presents the findings of a study that sought to address the gap this emphasis creates by focussing on newspaper coverage of religion on an ‘ordinary day’. Located within a Western context, the study had three main objectives:

1) The development of an internationally comparable data set on religion and the media and to use these data sets for comparative analysis.

2) To develop and implement strategies of knowledge exchange between international researchers examining religion in the public sphere.

3) To disseminate the findings arising from comparative research on the portrayal of religion in the media.

But working in a multi-national, interdisciplinary context immediately raised conceptual questions to address. What do we mean by an ordinary day for example? There are two aspects to this question – the extent to which the day is ordinary (not a significant religious holiday or quiet news period such as the Summer holidays) and the extent to which the coverage is ordinary – what is the norm if we are not focussing on specific and controversial case studies? The former is more significant to us as it is unlikely that coverage will be uncontroversial given that the criteria for news selection tends towards the sensational. But the latter will also be an important aspect of the findings, what does everyday (frequently occurring) coverage of religion in newspapers look like? This could also have political implications by displacing elitism and focussing on popular religion that is part of common culture (Williams, 1983). By analyzing one day in three separate years, we could establish whether coverage was commonplace or unusual. We also chose not to limit the analysis to hard news, which tends to focus on contentious issues, but incorporate all newspaper content including advertisements and announcements, and therefore provide a comprehensive picture of how religion is regularly covered in the specific news sources from these countries.

‘Religion’, a concept not without controversies over its definition (Smith 1998), was conceptualized as with Knott et al. (2013) in a broad sense, in both its conventional and common form. Conventional religion is broadly interpreted as ‘institutionalised’ (drawing on Towler’s 1974 definition used by Knott et al.). Common religion is that of the supernatural or spiritual; belief and practices not associated with formal religion including references to luck, fate and magic, for example. We also incorporated Knott et al.’s category of the secular sacred, i.e. non-religious values or beliefs held to be sacred by the societies under study. There is always an element of subjectivity in interpreting these categories, particularly the latter, and this is evident in the coding variations detailed in Michels and Helland’s article in this special issue. However, all studies have to make decisions on these issues and by using the definitions of a previous project, that the participants were familiar with, we concluded would offer the greatest reliability.

*The Time Period: Context*

This project was devised in the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008/9. The period of austerity politics that followed sowed the seeds of discontent that has favoured the right-wing populist parties which emerged into the mainstream following this study. The election of Donald Trump (2016) and the result of the UK EU referendum (BREXIT, 2016) are two significant moments which appeared to be the outcome of several years of divisive identity politics resulting in what has popularly become known as ‘culture wars’ (and by framing as such allows Governments and right-wing groups to stifle dissent demonstrated by attacks on ‘woke’ culture). But this politics is also a result of a longer trajectory of neoliberal policies in Western contexts in which the deregulation of markets has led to globalization (economic, political, cultural), destabilizing national economies and identities. In this context, news reporting has heightened feelings of risk, allowing Governments to shore up both its economic, security and border policies. This is due to austerity politics targeting both immigration, multiculturalism and the welfare state, scapegoating marginalized groups (for the economic crisis) and dividing communities over scarce resources (Khiabany and Williamson, 2012). Meanwhile the far right have capitalized on the uncertainties created in this environment using nationalist rhetoric to garner support. The news reporting analyzed in this project takes place in this space between the financial crash and the growth of populism (2013-15) and therefore provides a fascinating case study for examining the struggle over identity and discourse within different national but Western contexts.

These political identity struggles are very much evident in the news coverage of this day over the three year period. In 2013 austerity is still a topic of debate in the UK and Canadian press and the ongoing debate about the appropriateness of the niqab in Western contexts rages on. In Australia the election of a Catholic Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, and sex abuse in the catholic church casts a spotlight on religious identity, and the role of religion in politics. In 2014 global conflict in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan and the growth of ISIS saw a heavy focus on Islamism. The outcomes of the global war on terror play out in the politics of integration as anxieties about immigration and multiculturalism are evident in stories about Asian grooming gangs (UK), protests against mosque building (Australia), and religious education in schools (Australia). The Scottish referendum on independence was a sign of growing nationalism. In 2015 the refugee crisis in Europe loomed large and the US presidential election began to gather steam. Meanwhile local stories continued to debate religious and political identity as newspapers struggled to square the tensions between stories that found institutional religion wanting (sex abuse scandals), with a broader emphasis on traditional values in their reporting, and increasing diversification in local populations and beliefs (internal division within national churches is one example).

This newspaper reporting (which is increasingly consumed online) takes place within a hybrid media environment where these articles compete for attention amongst a myriad of diverse offerings. Yet the political economy of the Internet still results in an uneven distribution which favours traditional news sources (albeit being consumed on diverse platforms). Newspapers often still set the agenda for other news sources and are a barometer for dominant viewpoints. While the intertextual dimension of news consumption is important to remember when analyzing news content, the hegemonic content, illustrated by the similarity in findings from this study demonstrates how, and in the way this discourse is circulated, these ideas can establish their power and authority. However, news production and consumption is becoming increasingly partisan as companies try to hold the attention of their audiences in such a highly competitive attention economy. The affective turn in news is also a product of this commercial imperative (Wahl-Jorgenson and Pantti, 2021). In this context, which seeks to mobilize and exploit emotion, we can only expect the divisive and binary politics of ‘culture wars’ to increase the attention on the issues highlighted by this study.

*Media Representation of Religions*

Scholarly inquiry into news media representation of religion has developed significantly, especially after the 9/11 terror attacks, with particular attention on migration and the presence of Islam and Muslims in Western contexts. Much of this scholarship have given primacy to how Islam and Muslims are portrayed in news media, first in the North American and European contexts, and later also in colonial-settler nations such as Australia. The fact that much of this scholarship benchmarks 9/11 as a date of significance also demonstrates a gap in understanding the concept and presence of religion more broadly as a dynamic phenomenon enmeshed in lived experiences, that contradicts the dominant secularization thesis, which has long asserted that religion, as a social value, will dissipate with time and through modernization processes.

Research in this area consistently demonstrates that media representations of religions place a certain emphasis on values and characteristics of religions over others, and are more inclined towards the portrayals of controversies, scandals and the sensational (Vultee et al, 2010). Despite much scholarly critique, researchers continue to find Muslims presented as ‘Others’ within these contexts (Ahmed and Matthes, 2016; Poole 2019; Weng and Halafoff, 2020; Weng and Mansouri, 2021), reported on through limited and biased media frames (Ewart and Rane, 2011; Rane, Ewart, and Abdalla, 2010), and especially through frames of violence, terrorism and extremism, that have contributed to social fears (Mansouri and Vergani, 2018; Weng and Mansouri, 2021). At the same time, there have been increased visibility and presence of minority religions in news media (e.g. Mann, 2015; Fleras, 2011). News media also problematically tend to have a preference of representing more clearly defined religions or nonreligion, thereby rendering people or groups that are not outrightly atheist or identify with clearly specified religions 'invisible' in media representation (Taira, 2015, p. 117). In Western contexts, that have largely developed out of a Judeo-Christian heritage, Christianity and/or Catholicism have mostly been politicized and polarized with non-religiosity through media frames (Vultee et al, 2010; Weng 2019, 2020; Zwartz, 2016). These media representations of religions are frequently disconnected from the realities and lived experiences of religious communities (Weng and Halafoff, 2020) and it is hardly surprising that religious communities often echo this sentiment (Day, 2016).

The use of selected news frames remains problematic in media representation of religions, as research demonstrates that these lenses are not only conveniently applied in similar news stories, they tend to inform perceptions of religions and religious communities (Mansouri and Vergani, 2018). Editors in newsrooms have been found to request journalists report on stories that fit within certain narratives to promote news circulation (Chen, 2003, p.29), raising questions on the training of journalists to report on religion, and the dynamics of newsroom culture (Weng and Halafoff, 2020; Weng and Wake, forthcoming). A lack of diversity within newsrooms has also contributed to problematic reporting with minority producers often feeling a ‘burden of responsibility’ in being required to represent particular communities (Poole, 2014). While there have been suggestions that journalists and newsrooms are hostile towards religions, Moore suggests that the media is in fact ‘pro-spiritual’; his research found that Buddhism was consistently shown as positive despite opportunities to present other aspects of those stories (Moore, 2008, p. 248). Vultee, Craft and Velker (2010, p. 162) similarly noted a positive inclination in the portrayal of spirituality, rather than religious doctrines and instructions.

*Methods*

Four countries, the U.K., Canada, Finland and Australia, were selected for this multi-national project, and printed newspapers were collected for data analysis. The aim was to select a national, regional and local newspaper from each country where appropriate, the result being a focus on the cities of Manchester, Ottawa and the Quebec region (to cover Anglophone and Francophone Canada), Helsinki and Turku, and Melbourne. Where regional was not appropriate, countries substituted this with a free paper distributed around transport hubs (such as the UK’s *Metro*). Quantitative content analysis was applied in this research, where references were coded and counted, and thematically mapped out. The unit of analysis was any references made to the concept of religion, expansively understood through the categories of conventional religion, common religion and the secular sacred, as mentioned above (Knott et al., 2013). A code book or coding schedule was devised after several meetings of the researchers to discuss the categories (a copy can be found in the article by Michels and Helland who also provide a more detailed and critical reflection of the methods). Within each country team, researchers would code independently and compare their findings, and refine the coding instructions within the team as appropriate. Given the extensiveness of the sub-categories in the coding book, examples were provided for each of these sub-categories to facilitate cross-country collaborative efforts and to ensure that coding could be replicated with sufficient accuracy within the same research. In reality, challenges were present in maintaining coding consistency across different national teams, and across the duration of this project especially where there were changes to the research team in some cases. The subjective nature of what defines ‘religion’ in its broad sense remained an issue when the Canadian team compared the way all national teams coded their data (see Michels and Helland, this issue). Christianity is also embedded across language, places, and names, which was particularly prominent for researchers from a non-Western heritage and background on the Australian and Quebec teams. This culturalized presence of Christianity is pervasive to the degree that it becomes problematic to code in an identifiable way, and frequently coded as ‘Religion General’, such that Halafoff noted that there needs to be a ‘Christian’ sub-category, which is missing from the codebook established by Knott et al. (2013). This Christian emphasis, while appropriate for a cross-country study that examines Western contexts, will need to reconsider its Christian assumption and be contextualized for future study in non-Western contexts (Weng, 2020, p. 72-3).

As references from the categories of conventional religion, common religion and the secular sacred were counted, patterns emerged where references in certain sub-categories, such as Islam under conventional religion, were more prominent in numbers than others. This information guided the qualitative approach to selecting specific news stories where these references featured. In the articles included in this issue, we highlight those stories that could be seen to be representative of the categories of conventional, common religion and the secular sacred as they appeared in the newspapers selected, as well as featuring key global, national and local stories covered. In doing so the articles present a view of how religion, in its broad sense, is referred to on an ordinary day across the four countries.

*Summary of articles*

Identity politics are at the centre of press representation in the UK (Poole). Fiercely partisan, the different newspapers fight to shore up support for their side on the issues under debate. On the run up to the EU referendum (2016), this meant an excessive focus on the negative effects of diversity in an attempt to rally support for BREXIT by a largely nationalist press. However, multiculturalism is now a feature of UK demography and there is a desire to be seen as inclusive. While a narrative of cultural incompatibility is largely applied to representations of Islam and Muslims, there is nuance across, between, even within articles. This does, however, result in an extreme/moderate binary framework which also plays out in the comparison of Islam to other religions. While there is a bias towards negativity in the news more generally then, a desire to retain cultural heritage, practices and what are perceived as traditional values does result in positive in-group representations for Christianity in general. The press, as represented here, can demonstrate intelligent and sensitive journalism but is also largely supportive of existing structures and values. The populist turn is not so much a shift but a continuation for the UK’s press.

The impact of diversity is also evident in coverage of religion in Finland (Taira and Kyyrö). As Finland becomes more diverse and secularizes (or seeks unofficial forms of spirituality), the privileged position of the Lutheran and Orthodox churches is challenged. Despite this, and the shift towards common religion found in the study, this is still the dominant emphasis of news about religion in Finland, even if coverage now tends to focus more on conflicts within the Church. And while coverage is broadly supportive of the Lutheran church, the Finnish press does lean towards liberal over conservative values, and diversity over homogeneity. Less populist than the UK’s press, it could be argued that it is nationalist in its focus on domestic news (when it comes to reporting on religion). The politics of religion is therefore apparent even at the micro level in Finland, where parish issues are reported as part of the everyday practices of civil society. While support for the traditional church(es) is still the norm then, diversity is becoming more obvious.

Post-colonial Australia is multicultural, and increasingly diverse in cultures and languages, yet media representation of religion remains concentrated on the Abrahamic faith traditions (Weng and Halafoff). References to Christianity strongly featured across different news genres, and in political, social and cultural life that reflect its privileged position in Australian society. Religion became a politicized issue during John Howard’s Prime Ministership from 2007, through a questioning of multiculturalism, where he promoted a common set of ‘Australian values’ that embeds Judeo-Christian principles. Minority religions, spirituality (including Aboriginal Spirituality) and the secular sacred were referenced across the newspapers, but had a comparatively less prominent place to Abrahamic faiths. The Othering and sensationalization of Islam and Muslims were also found, especially through News Corp publications; yet more positive coverage of Islam is also evident through genres that refer to social and cultural everyday experiences such as entertainment and crossword puzzles.

Religious diversity is a strong feature in Canadian newspapers, evident through increasing openness to religious minorities in the face of religious changes in its context (Helland and Michels). Canadian multicultural policies from the 1970s, with a political focus on being a ‘cultural mosaic’, is reflected through these media representations of religions. While Canadian political, social and cultural life has largely been shaped by Catholic and Protestant Christianity, gradual processes of secularization, along with increasing non-religiosity in its population, has come to be reflected in news media’s reporting of religious diversity and differences. Compared to media representation studies in the 1980s, where Christianity was dominantly represented, with less coverage of religious minorities, this study found conflicting portrayals of Islam as a source of terror and a religion of peace, across the selection of newspapers, from a variety of neutral and more conservative political positions.

Political debates about religion centred on laïcité and the public visibility of religious symbols, especially through the Quebec’s proposed ‘Charter of Values’, during a period of global concerns about extremist Islamic terrorism (Vanasse-Pelletier et al). Changes to immigration from the 1970s began to see an increase in the diversification of cultures and religions in Quebec, primarily through mass migration of Asians and Muslims. Despite secularization processes, references to cultural Christianity, especially Roman Catholicism, were prominent across the data, as with Islam. Religion in Quebecker media and public life is also evident through the presence of common religion, with an interest in the supernatural, which further suggests that enchantment remains a distinct feature of Quebecker society.

Shipley’s article on the relationship between (non)religion and sexuality in the Canadian context provides an in-depth topical case study. While (mainstream) media’s depiction of religion and sexuality are popularly deemed to be antagonistic and/or polarizing, her study found that alternative media provide a more nuanced and intersectional approach to this topic. This finding parallels a growing nonreligious demographic in Canada, but also attends to the consumption habits of alternative media audiences. Such findings continue to suggest the imperative of news media to select and construct salient news frames and stories to cater to their audience. These findings also perhaps reflect Canada’s political context during the period of the study, where Prime Minister Stephen Harper downplayed religions’ political roles to focus on a more cohesive national ideology.

The last chapter provides both a useful starting and end point for thinking about this project. Originally conceived as a thematic chapter about coverage of New Religious Movements, it now provides a critical reflection of the methods of this study and the apparent absence of this theme in reporting. Michels and Helland reflect on the methodological issues raised by a multi-country study with numerous participants and the effects on inter-coder reliability. Despite lengthy meetings to discuss and define coding categories, they still identify discrepancies in the decisions made across country teams. However, this was only detected because the data was pooled in one database. This concluding chapter raises key concerns for future studies of religion or those that are large in scale. More coding checks at regular intervals would assist with this; the fact that this study was unfunded, following the initial start-up phase, meant this was less likely. Funding provides the time and space to interrogate assumptions around definitions that coding instructions are not always able to fulfil. Michels and Helland define these as ‘unconsidered choices’ starkly illustrated by the decision to code ISIS as Islam which is problematic in lots of ways and can result in distorted findings (although this can also be discussed in the analysis). Particular attention, in future studies, should also be given to the types of data whose visibility is further decreased by these methods. For example, if a topic like New Religious Movements has less visibility in the news as it is mainly referenced and spread across coverage; a method that concentrates on frequency and then focuses its analysis on the voluminous coverage, results in the same topics being repeatedly ignored. The (intended) inclusion of some thematic, rather than country, chapters in this project sought to address some this issue but lack of funding (and therefore time) prevented the completion of all of these. As Michels and Helland point out, careful consideration should be given to these methodological choices and definitions to avoid replicating the mistakes of news reporting.

*Conclusion*

Despite these challenges, this project has revealed some significant similarities in the reporting of religion across these Western contexts. Domestic news dominates, with ‘cultural’ Christianity (Vanasse-Pelletier et al., this issue) embedded within this, but there is also evidence of a growth of religious diversity, and a greater tolerance towards it. Following ‘religion in general’ (mostly ‘Christianity in general’ due to the specific context) Catholicism is still prominent in those countries where it held privilege but Islam is now the single religion that dominates the headlines as a main topic (mostly in international news but also national). However, the over-representation of Islam is evidence of the considerable discursive labour invested in criticizing Islam and the contribution this makes to boundary making. Although mostly negative, it is not a straightforward representation, ISIS is not always conflated with Islam, for example. This broad support for tradition alongside greater liberalization and diversity (a diversity that largely equates to Islam in these newspapers) results in a focus on conflict whether that be through internal conflicts within national churches or wider struggles over national identity.

It was here where some national specificities became apparent and coverage of the wearing of hijab was pertinent to this (the influence of laïcité in Quebec, for example). News reporting of religious head-coverings showed that whilst the topics under debate may be similar, the tone can be very different. Canada promoted a liberal version of itself compared to Quebec (on this topic) and also in the UK for example, where the press tends to be more conservative. It was in the Canada sample where more positive representations of Muslim women were evident. Apart from news, (common) religion features highly in adverts. Religion in sport is often mentioned, but in some countries (Canada and Australia) more than others (Finland). There were no strong differences in coverage over the time period studied except the shift to focus on the European refugee crisis in 2015 which highlighted specific ideological stances, particularly in the UK due to its proximity to the event, but provided a more pronounced focal point for debate about immigration in all countries.

The sample choice had a clear impact on results with the national newspapers containing more international news and conventional religion; the *Metro*, with its focus on entertainment, demonstrates the seepage of common forms of religion into a wider variety of genres that constitute newspaper content (such as advertisements for fortune tellers in Quebec). The inclusion of some local newspapers provides another dimension to coverage of more popular forms of religion or religious practice and highlights the normalization of this in everyday life (Finland, UK). A sample which included more liberal newspapers or a different local paper might have slightly different results, in the UK for example. The chapter on sexuality (Shipley, this issue) demonstrates how the inclusion of alternative sources can produce more diverse and nuanced narratives. Despite this, coverage overall is in line with other studies of religion in the news (Knott et al., 2013, Weng 2019, 2020; Weng and Halafoff, 2020). Future research may attend to the changing ecology of the media landscape where the consumption of news takes place across various platforms.

The study shows that coverage of religion on an ordinary day is rarely ordinary but this is partly due to news values which focus on conflict and controversy. In the process of the analysis and writing up of research, there is also a tendency to focus on these aspects, which can over emphasize the similarities in coverage. Of course, these similarities are also driven by globalization, in terms of political economy and news production. Cultural religion *is* presented as everyday (in passing references) and local news also offered a valuable insight into the expression of religion in different forms. It is here where we really see the ‘ordinary’ aspects of religion through the practice of everyday rituals. But as Taira and Kyyrö point out in their chapter, with reference to Hjarvard’s (2012) concept of banal religion, common religion references are regular features of a reimagining of religion in a changing context. Despite the increasing secularization and individualization of religion then, as societies continue to diversify, religion will continue to be an important resource for news as these complexities play out. The negativization of Islam that has developed out of this context, as well as a wider focus on conflict, has further implications for the divisive politics that have become evident over this time. In an environment where misinformation is rife, mainstream news has a responsibility to provide factual, ethical journalism that audiences can trust. However, as news becomes more commodified and partisan, academic work can play a role in highlighting the problems this poses for democracy and wider society.

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