

Ten Years of the *Journal for Religion, Film and Media*

Methods, Theories, and Current Trends

Abstract

Responding to the articles in the 10-year-anniversary issue of the *Journal for Religion, Film and Media*, this article provides some methodological and theoretical considerations for the field of religion and media. First, it addresses qualitative and quantitative approaches, evaluating the impact of digital tools and artificial intelligence on the analysis of data. Second, it discusses issues connected to power, focusing on decoloniality and secularization in the study of religion. Lastly, it traces trends in the field of religion and media, discussing the theory of (hyper)mediation and the role of religion within social movements and in connection with other cultural issues.

Keywords

Digital Religion, Secularization, Decoloniality, Artificial Intelligence, Hypermediation

Biography

Giulia Evolvi is a Marie Skłodowska Curie fellow at the University of Bologna, Italy, with project MERGE on digital religion and gender. She is also a visiting scholar at the Center for Media, Religion and Culture at the University of Colorado Boulder, USA, where she obtained her PhD. Previously, Evolvi worked at Erasmus University in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, and at Ruhr University in Bochum, Germany.

Introduction

Religion has always been mediated, as religion and media scholar Stewart Hoover¹ has argued. This idea is significant for this anniversary issue of the *Journal for Religion, Film and Media* (JRFM), which over the last ten years has published articles and reviews on religion and a variety of media forms,

1 Hoover 2006.

including films, music, video games, images, and technology, thus demonstrating a range of examples of religious mediation. This article discusses religion as a cultural system² that employs media to disseminate messages, connect people, and produce new meanings. The articles in this issue point to a broad definition of “media” as encompassing every object or technology used to create meaning, in line with the theoretical approach of mediation.³ This description is consistent with the work of Birgit Meyer⁴ on religion and materiality, mentioned in some of the articles. Meyer’s approach involves taking as “media” all objects that help people move from immanence to transcendence and experience religion through mediation. This topic is central to this issue, and also to JRFM in general. The journal’s contribution to the field of religion and media is, in my opinion, to offer reflections on how people produce meaning through religious mediation, and how scholars can detect these meanings by studying media production, media consumption, and media texts.

Such in-depth analysis of the role of religious mediation is evident in the article in this issue by Philippe Bornet, who considers pictures as religious media that can travel in time and space, and in this case, even by means of publication in JRFM. Yara González-Justiniano explores art and media in Puerto Rico, but similarly focuses on embodied and material practices, using the expression *a flor de piel* (brought to the surface) to conceptualize the mediation experience. The notion of art as a medium for the experience of religion is also explored in Mirna Vohnsen’s article, which assesses scholarly engagement with Jewish Latin American films. Sofia Sjö reflects on the mediation of religion as described by the results of a global project on youth, showing the significance and overlap of online and offline religious practices, including for those who claim no religion. Study of the religious medium is explored by Marie-Therese Mäder, who presents three types of method, focused on media content, consumption, and reception, respectively. The remaining two articles consider the current state of academic publications and teaching, with Christian Wessely focusing on the opportunities and challenges of Open Access for journals like JRFM and Alexander Darius Ornela discussing the teaching of religion and media within the current academic landscape, where humanities and social sciences are often underfunded

2 In this article I largely deploy Clifford Geertz’s definition of religion; see Geertz 1983 [1966].

3 Martin-Barbero 1993.

4 See for example Meyer 2006.

and disregarded. I see both these articles as connected to the concept of religious mediation in that they show modes of dissemination and communication that help determine the role of religion in contemporary societies.

These articles not only showcase empirical research in the field of religion and media but also discuss facets of contemporary academia and the participation of the researcher in collecting, analyzing, and communicating data. In the first section, I discuss methodological approaches raised in this issue, emphasizing the contribution of digital tools and artificial intelligence. I then explore how these articles present the issue of power, in particular in connection with decoloniality and secularization. And finally, I delineate some current trends that will be relevant for framing the future study of religion and media.

(Big) Data, Interviews, and Artificial Intelligence

Religion entails multi-layered symbols and meanings that are complex to explore. When it comes to religion and media, the object of study can vary; it might concern, for example, material practices, embodiments, visual aesthetics, media content, or technological adaptations. As a result, to understand how religious meanings are produced and consumed and how religion travels and evolves, I often advocate for the use of multi-method approaches that consider various types of media. For example, we can combine visual analysis with textual/discourse analysis,⁵ or conduct digital ethnography with a focus on offline contexts.⁶ In this way, the researcher can try to capture the complexity of religious phenomena that exist across media boundaries and travel through different platforms.

It is for this reason that I appreciate the efforts in this issue of JRFM to raise and discuss various methodological approaches in the study of religion and media, most specifically in Mäder's article. Starting from the premise that the task of the scholar is to untangle religious meanings, Mäder presents three possible methodological perspectives, focusing on (1) media representation, (2) media texts together with consumption, (3) and audience studies. In so doing, the article outlines possibilities for both qualitative and quantitative studies, which are both crucial for scholars in the

5 Machin/Mayr 2012.

6 Postill/Pink 2012.

field of religion and media, who are increasingly considering approaches based on big data analysis.⁷ While Sjö's article does not address methodology so specifically, her reflections on the selection of interviewees for a 12-country study are thought-provoking. To analyze youth in countries that are very different in terms of their religious landscape and access to technology – such as Ghana, China, and Sweden – the researchers mostly approached university students, who are neither representative of the entire population of the country nor identical across countries in terms of their “student” characteristics. Such reflections identify the possible limitations of a particular study and more broadly call on scholars to recognize challenges in data collection.

Further challenges faced by scholars of religion and media are highlighted in Borner's attention to digital tools. With additional input from artificial intelligence, academics can today create large datasets with an increasing number of tools, from text archives to software for creating pictures, from algorithms organizing data to programs to create large datasets.⁸ Here, I propose, is one means to tackle the challenge, noted above, of studying complex religious phenomena across platforms. Scholars are already analyzing the relationship between religion and AI,⁹ often seen as a new frontier in the study of religion and media. AI can be both an object of study and a tool for data collection and analysis.

The richness of the possibilities offered by digital tools, especially AI, is encumbered with ethical implications. If literature reviews, data collection, and data analysis can be performed by digital tools, what role is to be reserved for researchers? This issue of *JRFM* shows that the study of complex subjects like religion and media needs planning and contextual awareness. As the articles discuss and demonstrate, researchers need strategies for understanding the peculiarities of particular phenomena; these strategies, I believe, should be designed by scholars, with digital tools as their assistant. On the basis of the articles in this issue, I now turn to how scholars can address critical themes in order to produce good scholarship on religion and media.

7 An example of big data analysis combined with qualitative analysis can be found in Elwert/Evolvi/Neumaier/de Wildt 2023.

8 For examples of digital approaches in social sciences see Rogers 2024.

9 See for instance Singler 2020.

Relevant Aspects in Religion and Media: Power, Decoloniality, and Secularization

Alongside its attention to method, this issue of JRFM demonstrates how scholars of media and religion can conceptualize pressing questions that are present in empirical case studies from different geographical contexts. One prominent issue that emerges from all the articles concerns power. Closely connected to the question of power, several articles tackle issues around decoloniality and secularization, which I will discuss in this section.

Power and religion are often involved – religious institutions and individuals may seek power or be entangled in power dynamics. Religions create discourses that are deeply connected with power. One example of this entanglement is discussed in Bornet’s article, which presents a case study of image circulation that shows how actors have the power to create and diffuse media. This article can be put in conversation with the work of Heidi Campbell¹⁰ regarding how groups negotiate media use, as religious institutions will often evaluate whether they should adopt a new medium. Bornet’s example suggests that certain leaders and groups can choose to participate in the creation of media, but, I would argue, not all religious groups have this kind of power and therefore must develop strategies for gaining some control of the mediation of their practices and beliefs.

Bornet discusses the global circulation of pictures, making cross-cultural comparisons and focusing attention on the global context of religion and media, an object of inquiry made all the more relevant by online exchanges and rapid diffusion through the Internet. Global perspectives in the field should consider decolonial approaches, which often highlight the hybrid nature of religious practices.¹¹ In this issue, González-Justiniano does excellent work in discussing the aesthetics of media production in Puerto Rico. The article shows not only the potential hybridity of cultural productions but also how media can be tools for religious resistance against a dominant colonial power. Similarly, even if not so closely focused on decoloniality, Vohnsen’s article explores the study of transnational contexts outside the traditional “Western” understanding of religion and media. Choosing empirical cases that have been overlooked or marginal-

¹⁰ Campbell 2007.

¹¹ See for example Bhabha 2004.

ized within the field of religion and media can bring greater attention to the global context.

If we are to consider power, especially in a global perspective, we will inevitably find ourselves discussing the position of religion in contemporary societies. While in the 1970s and 1980s several scholars predicted secularization as inevitable, more recent work has argued that religion continues to have a powerful role in the public sphere, especially in contexts beyond Europe.¹² For this reason, I particularly welcome Sjö's mention of the study of atheist and non-religious youth: the decline of traditional forms of religiosity does not mean that religion should be sidelined in academic research; indeed, the phenomenon of people abandoning religion should be included in the field. Mediation is particularly relevant here, as a venue for alternative religious knowledge.¹³

Ornella's article addresses the decision by universities in several countries to cut the teaching of religion and eliminate departments of religion which suggests that the study of religion is not considered relevant. This sidelining of the study of religion is, in my opinion, a consequence of how academia has been conditioned to think that religion no longer has power, even though it remains a key to understanding cultures, societies, and politics. The scholar's power is often dependent on publication, as is noted in Wessely's article on Open Access publication and the need for institutional support and awareness. Authors' power to publish is not absolute, for it may be conditioned by type of publication, geographical location, and institutional support. Access to religious-knowledge production and consumption is uneven. Power holds a significant place in global perspectives and understandings of religion in contemporary societies, but it also affects academia and will likely determine future trends in the field of religion and media.

Current Trends and Next Steps

Ten years is a significant timeframe for the study of religion and media, given in particular the rapid development of digital technologies and the increased possibilities for the communication of religion. JRFM's publication

12 For discussions about secularization see for instance Casanova 1994; Taylor 2007.

13 Herbert 2011.

history is a testimony to how a field develops in acknowledging new leanings and germane topics. Where technological developments and religious evolutions will lead us next is not easy to predict, but the articles in this issue help us recognize current trends in the field.

First, I started this article by discussing the idea of mediation and its connection to material objects and embodied practices. Elsewhere¹⁴ I have argued that mediation in today's digital society is increasingly fast-paced and traverses boundaries between platforms. The concept of *hypermediation* captures the idea that digital tools can bring us "beyond" a linear practice of mediation. They can offer scholars new venues for (big) data analysis and give religious groups novel opportunities for spreading their messages.

Second, studying power means studying groups that challenge powerful institutions. This approach is connected to decolonial perspectives that focus on how marginalized groups push back against certain colonial imaginaries, as discussed in this issue. In this sense, directing greater scholarly attention to the theoretical concepts of counter-publics or alternative publics¹⁵ will help us explore religious groups that exist at the margins of powerful institutions but use media to creatively imagine different societies.

Third, and connected to the previous point, religion can and does function as a framework for action and social change. While the study of social movements has often overlooked the role of religion,¹⁶ religion is undoubtedly entangled with politics, as well as with issues of gender, sexuality, nationality, migration, and belonging. The production of mediated aesthetics and discourses can serve as a form of resistance. Therefore, in the future the field of religion and media will probably have to continue to focus not only on global perspectives and issues of power, but also on the discursive production of groups that merge religion with other cultural and social issues. This issue of JRFM does excellent work in underlining how religion continues to be positioned within today's academia and society, in particular in defining the essential role of the scholar of religion and media in recognizing and reading, contextualizing and investigating religious meanings in today's media.

14 Evolvi 2018.

15 See Fraser 1990; Warner 2005.

16 Snow/Beyerlein 2018.

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