

Editorial

Religious Filter Bubbles? The Influence of Religion on Mediated Public Spheres

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In recent decades, a series of comprehensive monographs have been published that delve into the intricate relationship between religion and the media, showcasing the burgeoning diversity and expansion of research in this field. The purpose of “Religious Filter Bubbles?”, this Special Issue of Religions, was to provide a comprehensive picture of the effects of religion on traditional and online media and the public sphere. This Special Issue also explored the influence of religion on broader social communication processes and the relationship between the discourses taking place in the public sphere and the religious influences appearing in them. In this Special Issue, we studied the thematizing power of religion and the possibilities of religious framing of media content. Furthermore, does religious framing strengthen or neutralize the filter bubble effect? This Special Issue examined how to recognize the construction of religious meaning within the media content, both fictional and non-fictional, including news programs and various genres of popular culture. This research extends beyond the narrative elements to the visual components as well.

This Special Issue contains eight studies, in which the theoretical foundational writings were written in the form of essays and reviews, while the further empirical research provides a wide international coverage, with studies reflecting on the situation in Switzerland, Romania, Hungary and Russia.

The writings of Coman and Hidas shed light on the deeper connections between the public sphere and religion from a sociological and philosophical point of view. This creates the broader theoretical framework of the Special Issue.

Zoltán Hidas’ study, titled “On the Relationship between Public Opinion and Religion: Theoretical Considerations”, delves into the intricate dynamics between public opinion and religion. In navigating the modern expectations thrust upon the public and the heightened regard for public opinion, this study confronts the challenge of exploring the origins of these expectations. Beginning with an examination of the evolution of the concept and reality of the public since the 18th century and considering Walter Lippmann’s critical perspectives, this study delves into both the practical and theoretical dimensions of public opinion and fundamental concepts such as collectivity and the crowd. This work also delves into the contributions of German philosopher Ferdinand Tönnies, who provided a sociologically grounded analysis of the idea of public opinion. It highlights how public intellectuals, endorsed by scientific knowledge, serve as focal points around which social imaginations converge, exerting significant influence on the shaping of public opinion. Furthermore, this study contemplates the evolving nature of religious engagement in the context of increasing publicity. It acknowledges that while the challenge of religious engagement has transformed in the face of modern conditions, individuals inclined towards self-transcendence bear distinct responsibilities even amidst these changes.

Mihai Coman’s study deals with the complex interplay between media, religion and the public sphere. In his analysis, the author tries to illustrate how the public sphere can be conceptualized within a discourse rich in religious symbolism, either as an integral part of



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religious institutions and their manifestations or, more interestingly, through the discourse spread by the media. This study sheds light on how the media functions as a ritualizing agent that creates a symbolic realm of action and contemplation. Journalists achieve this by presenting events within a narrative that assumes a predetermined and unchanging order and significance, reflecting elements of religious systems. The ritualization of the journalistic performance and the mythologizing of event representations appear as an effective mechanism in the transmission of events through language imbued with religious symbols, thereby shaping a public sphere framed in a religious context. This study reveals that, by using language imbued with sacralization, the media fabricates a religiously oriented public sphere. This sphere functions as a liminal and subjunctive framework, suggesting the emergence of a new form of public discourse defined by religious parameters in social and symbolic contexts that are largely different from traditional religious experiences.

Mónika Andok examines the theoretical underpinnings of religious filter bubbles in her article “Religious Filter Bubbles on the Digital Public Sphere”. Her study explores the online processes surrounding religious phenomena on digital platforms, particularly focusing on content filtering practices such as gatekeeping, echo chambers, and filter bubbles. Additionally, she provides a critical review of the existing scientific literature in the field, aiming to offer both a theoretical introduction to this Special Issue and a comprehensive analysis of the scientific context. For the first time, Andok’s study sheds light on the dual directionality of filtering in media content. By concentrating on the filter bubble phenomenon, she discusses its theory, critiques, and its relevance within religious content and communities. The latter part of her research delves into religious filter bubbles, examining previous investigations on the topic. Particularly noteworthy is her detailed analysis of a document released by the Catholic Church on 28 May 2023, titled “Towards Full Presence: Pastoral Reflection on Engagement with Social Media”. Through this analysis, Andok dissects how the Catholic Church addresses the opportunities and risks associated with network communication and social media usage, including the issue of filter bubbles, and explores the proposed solutions offered by the Church.

Katalin Márta Korpics, József István Béres and Anna Veronika Hommer’s article is entitled Tradition-driven religiosity on the Internet. In their study, they focus on the relationship between the changed media environment and religion. The evolving media landscape, coupled with the widespread adoption of social media, prompts an inquiry into the transformation of the public sphere over the past decade and the criteria that churches and religious communities can employ to adapt and flourish. It is imperative to recognize the inherent disparity between the nature of mass communication and the conveyance of religious ideas. As a result, there exists a persistent concern that even with utmost neutrality, mass media coverage of religions and religious practices may distort them. This paper endeavors to explore this paradox by examining the social media engagement of a tradition-bound religious community. Their research focuses on specific phenomena that give rise to broader assumptions. Despite the fact that the online realm is not the primary domain of the studied community, its activity has increasingly migrated to cyberspace due to the dwindling presence of interpersonal and group interactions. Through the application of quantitative and qualitative methodologies, this paper analyzes the community’s presence on Facebook.

This Special Issue then contains four articles based on empirical research: Herteliu studies a Romanian case, Koch and Hüsser a Swiss case, and Máté-Tóth and Rakovics a Hungarian case, while Napolitano examines a Russian case.

Agnos-Millian Herteliu conducts a comparative study in his paper entitled: A Brief Comparative Study between the Seventh-Day Adventist Church and the Romanian Orthodox Church about (Online) Religious Worship during the COVID-19 Pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted various aspects of society, including organized religion. With the closure of churches and the suspension of physical services, religious communities at all levels have faced significant challenges. Both regular attendees and occasional churchgoers were unsettled by the closure of their places of worship. Dur-

ing the epidemic, the online environment became a crucial lifeline for religious practices. However, not all churches immediately embraced the transition to online liturgical services, and not all had a history of utilizing digital technologies for religious purposes. In this context, Herteliu's article examines how religious communities in Romania responded to government decrees on social distancing. Herteliu focuses on specific religious ceremonies that were most affected by the shift to online liturgy, such as baptisms, eucharists, and funerals. Given the diverse interpretations of rituals and liturgical practices among different Christian Churches, this research primarily compares the approaches taken by the Orthodox Church and the neo-Protestant Seventh-day Adventist Church in Romania. Additionally, a brief comparison extends to global Adventist communities, particularly those residing in London, United Kingdom.

Carmen Koch and Angelica Hüsser's article "Caught in Narrative Patterns? Analysis of the Swiss News Coverage of Christians, Muslims, and Jews" reveals that media coverage of religious communities can have an impact on society and contribute to the manifestation of certain images in society. Given the recent surveys that have highlighted social tensions regarding Swiss Muslims and Jews, a thorough examination of the media coverage is imperative. Koch and Hüsser's study examines media representations of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, using framing and narrative pattern theories. Their research unfolds in two stages: Initially, they conducted focus group discussions with representatives of the three religious groups, revealing a shared sense of inadequate representation. Afterwards, a quantitative content analysis was performed on selected Swiss newspaper articles (both online and in print). The findings of the content analysis reveal different perspectives depending on the religious community: Christianity is portrayed from an internal point of view, while Judaism and Islam are portrayed from an external point of view in the Swiss media.

The study of András Máté-Tóth and Zsófia Rakovics examines Hungarian issues in their article "The Discourse of Christianity in Viktor Orbán's Rhetoric". This research examines Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's perspectives on religion and Christianity through a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The analysis is centered on speeches delivered at the Viktor Bálványosi Summer Free University and Student Camp, commonly referred to as Tuszványos, spanning from 1990 to 2022. These speeches offer a nuanced insight into the evolution of Orbán's ideologies over time. The empirical investigation unveils shifts in the interpretation of Christianity within Orbán's discourse, elucidating the interconnectedness between political Christianity and religious Christianity. Drawing from the theoretical framework of populism developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, the authors argue that Orbán's Christian concept can be understood within the context of discursive struggle for political hegemony. This framework posits that the construction of "the people" and society entails continual discourse, wherein "empty markers" play a pivotal role. Thus, Orbán's conception of Christianity can be aptly analyzed within the discourse of perpetual nation building. This study establishes a correlation between the political emphasis on Christianity and the collective identity wounds within Hungarian society. The authors contend that societal collective trauma necessitates a unifying narrative, with Christianity emerging as the central concept symbolizing unity.

Marianna Napolitano's research analyzes the Orthodox Encyclopaedia Project (2005–2022) entitled "The Promotion of Traditional Values through Films and Television Programs: The Moscow Patriarchate and the Orthodox Encyclopaedia Project (2005–2022)". On 26 May 2011, the World Council of the Russian People published a document entitled "Core Values: Foundations of National Unity", which is scrutinized by the researchers. Prepared by the Synod's Church–Society Cooperation Department, the document contains a catalog of 17 traditional values that emphasize a mixture of freedom, unity, patriotism, family and devotion. At that time, the Moscow Patriarchate regarded religious faith as the cornerstone of traditional values, which it maintains today. In the 2015 Russian national security strategy, the preservation and promotion of traditional Russian spiritual and moral values were prioritized, and this position was confirmed by the updated version of the

document published in July 2021. Napolitano uses this framework to describe the complex relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church and the state of the Russian Federation. This study examines this interaction in a specific area of visual culture: the cinema and television industry.

The studies in this Special Issue can be read as an introduction to understanding the functioning of religious filter bubbles. According to the editors' vision, the first step is to outline how the issue of religion appears in the public sphere, and what transformations we have seen in this regard from the 18th century to the present day. This is shown in Hidas' study. Then, based on Coman's writings, the reader can review how the media appears as an unavoidable phenomenon during the discussion of the issue of religion and the public and how religious issues are thematized in the contemporary media. After this, this Special Issue focused on the broader theoretical context, with the embeddedness of religion in the public sphere. Andok's study then focuses on the phenomenon of the filter bubble and presents a comprehensive review of the literature. From the analysis of Korpics and her co-authors, the reader can learn what opportunities are opened to traditional religious communities and religious content through the interfaces of the internet. After the theoretical studies, a section containing empirical research follows. It contains four studies, which are characterized by methodological diversity, and among them, the reader will find work based on content analyses, case studies and framing research. In a regional sense, we are also presented with extensive examples from Romanian, Swiss, Hungarian and Russian perspectives. Herteliu's article examines the functioning of the Romanian Seventh-Day Adventist Church and the Romanian Orthodox Church during the time of the coronavirus epidemic. Koch and her co-author analyze the religious bias of the Swiss news media. In the empirical research of Máté-Tóth and his co-author, the emerging religious dimension in the Hungarian political narrative is examined, while Napolitano analyzes Russian film culture and presents the functioning of online religious bubbles. This Special Issue thus contains a broad range of work, from theoretical background to empirical studies. Although it mainly contains studies that make use of a media science approach, it is also characterized by interdisciplinary studies, which draw from the models and methodologies of philosophy, sociology and linguistics.

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