

The Media, Culture, and Religion Perspective

Discovering a theory and methodology for studying media and religion

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1. Introduction

The cultural studies analysis of the media has now become a dominant paradigm of communication research, and the "Media, Religion, and Culture" focus is a central paradigm in research on religious media. For example, the biannual international conference on "Media, Religion, and Culture" usually draws from 300 to 600 people from around the world, virtually all carrying on research on media and religion from a cultural studies perspective. The cultural studies approach recognizes the importance of so-called "administrative research" used by broadcasters to measure the reach and effectiveness of programming, but argues that quantitative effects research really does not answer the central questions of religious media.

Religion is a personal response, seeking meaning in life and in one's universe. Religious expression is generally found within institutional religion, but the formal creed, rituals, devotions, and moral codes do not exhaust the personal experience of religion. The central question of the cultural studies approach is concerned with how individuals in groups use media to construct religious meaning in life and how this religious meaning relates to many other aspects of human life. This approach typically draws its theories and methodologies, not from psychology, functionalist sociology, or quantitative analysis, but from cultural anthropology, philosophy, literary studies, drama, and history. The methods of research are no less rigorous, but these are much closer to a tradition of humanities than to behavioral sciences

Until the 1970s virtually all research on media and religion was attempting to answer the questions of religious broadcasters as to what effects they were having. Most religious programs claimed to be having large audiences—impressed with what one can do with the media compared to the Sunday sermon—and they generally claimed to be "converting " many people. Others were skeptical, and the research was brought in to settle

this kind of dispute. Gradually, however, researchers moved away from these "effects" questions to how people are creating meaning from media . . . and many other sources. How and why did this move to a new set of questions in research on religious media come about? The present essay will explore this question.

A. *Effects studies—background*

From the time the 1920s-era Payne Studies concluded that the "impact" of film depended very much on family background, the subjective cultural background, and other factors influencing the subjective interpretation of the *meaning* of the film (in Rowland, 1983, pp. 92-99), media researchers felt that they had to use quantitative, objective methods to show the positive or negative effects of media in order to get action by governments or other public institutions. One of the typical examples was the attempt to devise an "objective" measuring scale of violent content which rated violence from the low point on the scale of a heated discussion to the high point of a bloody murder. The researchers then attempted to show a direct correlation between the level of violent content and aggressive behavior of audiences. Coders were instructed to mark exactly what they heard or saw whether it was a Bugs Bunny cartoon for children or a portrayal of the life of Christ. Not surprisingly, humorous children's cartoons, where rabbits, pigs, and ducks were continually getting smashed about came out as horribly violent. If the quantitative interpretation of violence that some social scientists proposed were applied to the media, there obviously would be no further presentation of great works of art such as Shakespeare and even the presentation of the Bible would be questionable.

What soon became evident is that the *meaning construction* placed on a scene or particular action can vary a great deal (Newcomb, 1978). The portrayal of the crucifixion of Jesus can be seen as sickeningly offensive or as a beautiful sign of enormous love

depending on the meaning that the beholder places on this. There might be wide agreement that the portrayal of explicit sexual relations is repugnant and morally offensive for many different reasons based on many different meanings. But in every case it is important to know the *meaning* not just for different audiences but for the writer, the producer, the actors, and a host of others who are involved in some way with producing something that does have meaning (Newcomb, 1978, pp. 279-280).

It also became apparent that although the official practices of a religious tradition might define a devotion or action as religious, adherents of the religious tradition might have their own unique interpretations of the official practices and might have experiences which are generally consonant with the theological norms of the tradition but are completely unique for a given person.

B. Trying to find the "definitive" proof of effects of religious broadcasts

With the advent of television in the 1950s, religious television stars in the U.S., such as the evangelist Billy Graham and Bishop Fulton Sheen, began to gain top audience ratings. The mainline Protestant churches felt that they were losing out and wondered if they could not find a Bishop Sheen in the Anglican or Methodist Church. There began to be considerable discussion of whether religious television personalities were really having a significant lasting impact, whether this was drawing people away from worship in the local churches, whether it appealed to young people, and other similar questions. In 1951 the National Council of Churches in the United States funded a major study of the "effectiveness of television" as a tool of evangelization. The director of the study was one of the great personalities of U.S. religious broadcasting, Everett Parker, and the team included Dallas Smythe, who later became one of the leaders in the critical cultural studies school.

Guided by August Hollingshead, one of the top sociologists in the U.S., the study employed the best current sociological tools and behaviorist social psychological models. It remains one of the classics of research on religious media, but, unfortunately, the authors themselves suggest that their methodology raised more questions than provided answers. The study confirmed what many other surveys had indicated and others would indicate: that the main users of religious broadcasting tended to be lower status, with less education, more likely to be women

and more likely to be elderly. The major conclusion was couched in terms of the behaviorist psychology model, namely, that following religious broadcasts "reduced anxiety" (Parker, Barry, & Smythe, 1955, p. 405). The researchers admitted that they discovered that their methodology (behavioral psychology and effects models) was too limited to answer the real questions of the study, even in the simplest terms (Parker, Barry, & Smythe, 1955, p. 395). The study did not reveal whether users of these programs become more religious, more moral, closer to their local churches, or more inspired to be involved in work with needy people. The results could say little about the relation of the broadcasts to general belief systems. These are questions which deal with *meaning*.

One must recognize that the researchers were using the available tools at hand in 1950. This was before the development of the sociology and anthropology of religion, before the major empirical work of Stark and Glock (1968) in the U.S., before the great theoretical advances of sociologists of religion such as Peter Berger (1969) and Thomas Luckmann (1967) or of David Martin (1969; 1980) and Bryan Wilson (1982) in Britain and a host of other major theorists in Europe. It even predated the development of "parish sociology" (Fichter, 1954). The 1960s, however, brought a major shift in the focus of the human sciences and in the emerging field of mass communication research in particular.

C. The shift from a media effects paradigm to recognition of the importance of the cultural context of media use

In the late 1940s Joseph Klapper, for many years head of the research department at CBS and close associate of Paul Lazarsfeld, did a definitive analysis (his doctoral thesis) of just what kind of effects one could expect from broadcasting. The surprising result of this analysis of hundreds of studies of media effects was that not a single study proved that the media had the powerful direct effects that broadcasters expected. The landmark book revealed that the influence of media is always limited by the subjective social context, knowledge, attitudes, motivation, and *interpretation* of the receiver (Klapper, 1965). This suggested that broadcasters had to take into consideration the motivations, interests, enjoyments, cultural values, and the subculture of the particular audience that they sought.

Klapper and others suggested that a better approach to audience analysis was not effects research but what came to be known as uses and gratification studies (Dennis & Wartella, 1996, p. 24). The central question was not what media did to people but what people did with the media. Peter Horsfield, in his comprehensive survey of the research on audiences of religious media in the early 1980s, found many doctoral theses and other research on religious broadcasting in the 1960s and 1970s using the uses and gratifications approach to document the now well-known patterns of religious media use (Horsfield, 1984, pp. 118-124).

Another major influence was Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media* (1964) which argued that the most significant impact of media was not on individual psychology but on whole cultures and societies. McLuhan came to media studies from literary analysis which stressed the activity of the person in reading and interpreting a text. Different media touched different senses—the ear, the eyes, the whole consciousness—and the person responded by constructing the meaning of the text according to the major sense influence, thereby producing an "oral culture" or a "visual culture." The perspective of McLuhan and his student, Walter Ong, S.J., (1982), also helped to shift interest of religious communicators from broadcast effects to the *interaction* of a medium and religious cultural movements.

Berger and Luckmann, in their work on *The Social Construction of Reality* (1967) shifted the focus away from the systemic functionalism of Parsons which made the person the result of systemic forces at the intersection of the social system, the personality system, and the economic system. The new focus made the starting point *culture*, defined now more cognitively as a system of meanings produced by persons in interaction. All this was part of the great personalist movement in the late 1960s, inspired by thinkers such as Marcuse (1968) who emphasized the importance of responding to one's own identity and creativity, thereby rejecting conformity to powerful social controls. The counter-cultural movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s rejected the subjection of one's life to the mobilization of industrialization and mass consumption. All this called into question the use of media for religious persuasion and manipulation. There was awakened interest in the use of media as a context for discovering personal religious values, religious cultural identity, and an active faith expression.

D. The movements of "education for critical use of the media"

In the 1950s the dominant idea of the Church's use of the media was still a powerful, dramatic speaker using a persuasive rhetoric to convert audiences to a deeper religious practice. The logic of religious broadcasts was not much different from political campaigns, advertising, or radio talks. In the 1960s, however, there was a growing critique, especially in the churches, of the harmful effects on faith and morals of the manipulation of sex, violence, advertising, and other forms of increasingly commercial "hard sell" media. This set in motion a series of efforts to introduce "media education" which assumed that the audience was not simply a passive receiver of message effects. Audiences can be critical and have their own ideas about the media. Media education encouraged people to carefully select media use according to their personal values and to use these media to deepen one's value commitments. Media education has varied in its focus from a defensive view of media as highly manipulative to an appreciation of our benignly banal popular culture, but most approaches seek to strengthen the use of media from the perspective of one's own active interpretation and one's own cultural identity.

A more important contribution, in many ways, was the movement of education for freedom which emerged in the countries of the South, especially in Latin America.

The churches in Latin America, India, Asia, and Africa began a process of education of the rural and urban poor with a general educational philosophy of helping the poor and marginal form grassroots, participatory organizations to solve their own problems. These efforts incorporated the educational methods of Paulo Freire (1990a; 1990b), Badal Sircar's concepts of popular theater in India (1978) and many other popular movements. In many ways this changed the perspective on religious broadcasting and research on religious broadcasting, in large part because this emphasis was adopted by international associations of religious broadcasting such as UNDA (now SIGNIS) and The World Association for Christian Communication (WACC).

First, these educational methods stressed not just new production techniques but the affirmation and promotion of the popular cultures. The media, especially small media such as group communication, popular theater, and people's radio, were the sites where the poor and marginal could develop their cultural identity.