

Religion and the new News: faith and the digital media

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2009/10/12/religion-and-the-new-news-faith-and-the-digital-media/

2009-10-12



The view from Cumberland Lodge

I am interested in how institutions or civil society organisations can use new media technologies and practices to enhance their communications. In that sense I don't think faith groups are different to other social bodies. So when I gave a speech to a conference at [Cumberland Lodge](#) on Religion and the News, I sought to set faith groups in the context of Networked Journalism rather than the other way around.

In practice, of course, people of faith do behave differently as individuals and groups, and so I will be fascinated to see how the new communications trends play out for religious organisations. Below is a version of the talk that I gave. [You can listen to [Podcast](#) of me being interviewed on faith and journalism [here](#)]

Many people of faith who have had direct experience of journalists will think that the news media is at least deficient, and probably pernicious. My personal view is that religion actually gets a very good deal from the media. It certainly gets a lot of attention, because religion has confounded the mid-20th century expectation that the modern world was synonymous with secularisation. You only have to look at issues around immigration, conflict, terrorism, sexuality, education and the arts to realise that religion is an increasing part of news.

I would argue that religion gets a lot of sympathetic and/or automatic coverage. Some of the coverage will be ignorant or hostile but I think that generally religion is treated in a far more respectful way than, say, elected politicians. And there is more understanding than, say, the coverage of science.

But I want to set this in context of the wider media environment and in doing so I want to suggest through a series of assertions how media change could offer opportunities and threats to the coverage or representation of faith.

1. First assertion: this is a wonderful time for people who think media can promote understanding.

1. There has never been more media – including quality media.
 2. Around the world people are richer and better educated and need more journalism to help cope with the information they need to live their lives.
 3. Then consider the opportunities of the Internet for expression, connection, assertion, debate, creativity, and knowledge transfer. It is historically unprecedented.
- But there are also dangers:
 1. there are threats to traditional business model which may reduce the capacity for journalism – both good and bad.
 2. there are threats from aspects of online discourses such as Jihadist websites. And a more general danger of a trend towards fragmentation and conflict.

3. plus there are limits on what media can do anyway: journalism is limited by time, resources and demand – especially in a 24/7 news world – it is the first draft of history, not a perfect record nor an omniscient, loving God
- The media sphere is a contestable space – and that means it should be allowed to be imperfect and relatively uncontrolled.

2. Second assertion: this is a dreadful time for people who think the media is only there to promote what they think

1. Whatever you think about the Internet – it has changed the news media for ever and profoundly – even places like Iran or China.
2. Whether that is for good or ill is – like everything else in life – is a matter of choice, of policy.
3. as subjects and consumers of the news media you can and must take responsibility for the media too
4. the new news media is a networked media – that allows all of us to be part of that production and consumption process.
5. But while it is easier than ever to get your message out, it can be harder to get people to listen – so get out the pulpit and start a conversation.

3. Third assertion: in a complex world the media environment is getting more complex

1. Issues such as migration, climate change, economics, science etc mean that the world is not getting any simpler
2. individuals' media consumption is now multi-layered, interactive, creative, passive, active
3. Likewise, the production process is more complex – it is participatory & multiplatform
4. there is much greater diversity. The challenge is to ensure that the variety and plurality is manifested in the content. There's no point having hundreds of channels if they all show the same show.
5. Mainstream media still dominates and will continue to do but it is getting more complex too. Think about how the BBC has become more diverse and how it will be encouraged to be more open and form partnerships

4. Fourth Assertion: the news media has to learn to be more networked to society as a whole

1. As communications become more disintermediated and converged news media practitioners are finding that

their audiences are becoming more disaggregated

2. people want news that is much more relevant to their lives and delivered in a way that suits them – that includes the content
3. So while the traditional ways of providing news such as bulletins or newspapers are still going strong, they are rapidly being used in different ways by the public
4. The public are also finding new ways to find out about their world – that includes doing it for themselves or getting information direct from organisations

5. Fifth Assertion: institutions like organised faiths also have to learn to be better as networked organisations

1. Institutions will now have a different relationship with MSM –
2. they can have a direct relationship with the public too
3. they can be media organisations creating their own channels and content
4. but just like MSM they have to go where the public is (social networks)
5. they have to be conversational – they have to listen as well as talk
6. they have to be more open, engaged, literate, interactive

6. Sixth Assertion: don't get mad, get media

1. stop complaining and do something about your coverage – start connecting.
2. Most faiths are natural networks
3. Sometimes these can be dangerous – the most successful online faith-orientated organisation I know is Al Qaeda
4. But if all you do is connect with your followers than obviously you are simply rebuilding ghettos in cyberspace
5. newspapers made the mistake of thinking that going online meant replicating their newsrooms and their pages online –
6. the analogy for the media is to shift from a fortress mentality and fortress institutions to networks. For people of faith, the analogy is to stop building digital churches or mosques – it is about building networks and connectivity

In conclusion:

1. media doesn't change things – people and politics does
2. new media is changing communications but it does not change real social conditions – people and politics does

3. In the end the role of faith in society is a political issue not a media issue – but if you want a healthy – robust – but open discourse, then you need to invest in the kind of media that will enable that exchange.
 4. We have to build the bridges that will link people online.
 5. At the moment I see a distinct lack of interest on the part of civil society organisations – from churches to trades unions to business – to do that bridge-building job.
- Copyright © 2014 London School of Economics and Political Science