
DOES RELIGION MATTER IN JOURNALISTS’ REPRESENTATIONS ABOUT PROFESSION? EVIDENCE FROM INTERNATIONAL SURVEY

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Abstract

This paper presents an overview on the religious representations of journalists from eighteen countries using the findings of survey-study ‘Worlds of Journalism’. The research was carried out between October 2007 and January 2010 on a sample of 1,800 journalists from 360 national, regional, and local media outlets. The outcomes have established a quite moderate religious orientation of journalists in some secular countries such as Australia, Austria, China or Spain, and a highest level of religiosity among journalists from predominantly Muslim states like Egypt and Indonesia. The results also have indicated an obvious bias of respondents to the factual journalism and a quite low influence of religion in their professional routines and values.

Keywords: religious self-representations, journalistic values, ‘Worlds of Journalism’

1. Introduction

The question ‘Are journalists religious?’ stirred many antagonistic discussions and interpretations. As Doug Underwood and Keith Stamm have said, the common way to classify the religiosity of journalists is to pigeonhole them “in one dimensional categories such as believer or nonbeliever, Christian or antagonist, church goer or church avoider, etc., and to generalize about journalists’ religiosity or secularity without a great deal of nuance” [1]. And most often, as shown in some recent field studies [2, 3], the journalists are stamped as irreligious, nonreligious, a-religious or even anti-religious. The most plausible explanation of this could be, according to Judith M. Buddenbaum, the religious underestimation of journalists determined by their “socially desirable answer. For most people, that means presenting themselves as religious. But for journalists, the desirable answer is just the opposite.” [4]

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This situation could be linked by the fact that the journalists work in an atypical profession in terms of organization and social responsibilities that primarily require neutrality in their narratives. They try to avoid any conflict of interests which could jeopardize their professional integrity and their right to practice this occupation [5, 6]. In consequence the influence of religion on the journalistic values is treated as a professional limitation rather than a guarantee of their moral integrity. However, one cannot discount the fact that the professional values of journalists vary from country to country. Practically, in the secular countries the journalists' discourse is more oriented towards the non-religious overview rather than in theocratic countries where journalists have promoted a very morality centred speech. In both cases the factor that motivated the journalistic discourses is the public interest, which means that the religious beliefs and values declared by journalists depend mainly on the social context in which they operate, and also on religious desirability of their audience.

Nevertheless, the religiosity of journalists from secular countries should not be underestimated. As Doug Underwood and Keith Stamm explain, the secular countries develop a type of 'civil religion' that has outlined many aspects of society, including the journalistic profession. Basically, the "religious values have been absorbed into the journalistic value system, whether they are recognized as religious or not, and that journalists, regardless of their avowed religious views, would prove to operate by moral value system that was consistent with the nation's religious heritage" [1]. The development of this pro-religious frame of reference is supported by the outcomes of field studies that identify a large number of believers among reporters and editors of conservatist small-town oriented media [7]. According to this view, the "journalists are more religious than the public believes them to be and that religion does make a difference in their work" [4, p. 10].

To confirm or to disprove the above perspectives, this paper will present an overview on the religious representations of journalists from eighteen countries using the findings of the study 'Worlds of Journalism', considered to be one of the largest journalistic comparative projects that have been completed in recent years. This paper will depict both the religious orientation of journalists, and the influence of religion in their professional activities and values starting from the basic assumption that the journalists prove a very strong religious orientation in their personal lives, but, professionally, they are guided by the organizational standards that are sometimes opposed to their religious values. In order to confirm this hypothesis, the article will answer the following questions: How religious are journalists? How much religion influences their professional activities? How important are for journalists the religious values compared to the professional values? What similarities and differences are highlighted between religious representations of the journalists of the eighteen targeted countries? Although the study was not designed necessarily to analyze the level of journalistic faith (the purpose of the project was to explore the professional culture of journalists), its findings can provide a broader outlook on

this problematique due to a considerable number of countries involved and a very large sample.

2. Research design

2.1. Methodological and research limitations

The data presented in this paper were collected through a questionnaire applied in eighteen countries, namely Australia, Austria, Brazil, Bulgaria, Chile, China, Egypt, Germany, Indonesia, Israel, Mexico, Romania, Russia, Spain, Switzerland, Turkey, Uganda, and the United States. In order to ensure the validity of all outcomes, the questionnaire was translated in the official languages of sampled countries by using a systematic procedure imposed by the project coordinators - translation-back translation. The study presumed two phases: national and transnational. In the first phase, each of the seventeen partners of the project conducted its national research, using the same conditions of sampling and data collection. In each country there were selected 100 working journalists representing the top 20 national, regional, and local media outlets. Data collection was carried out from October 2007 till January 2010 by telephone or face-to-face. In addition to the questionnaire, the national project participants (which included the author of this article) also gathered data on the sampled news and relevant properties of their media systems. In the second phase, the collected data were processed through the statistical data analysis program SPSS and was sent to Germany (the country which initiated the project) for comparing the differences and similarities of journalistic cultures.

The main goal of 'Worlds of Journalism' research project, which is presented in this paper from a religious perspective, was to deconstruct the journalistic culture in empirically measurable terms and evaluate its functionality across cultural borders. From the multitude of questions about the professional culture of journalists the answers to five of them were selected targeting religious affiliation of the respondents, their trust in religious institutions, and the influence exerted by religious leaders on journalists' routines.

As any comparative and quantitative research, that is a research based only on the questionnaire, the study presented in this paper has some methodological limitations. For example, it should be taken to account that there was a high rate of low responses to questions that journalists might think are too personal to answer to, such as: How important is religion or religious belief to you? Do you consider yourself as affiliated with any particular religion or religious denomination? In addition, in multi-cultural comparative studies like this, one cannot discount the fact that the cultural differences that determine the respondents' answers are frequently based on national stereotypes; stereotypes that can not be identified by using questionnaire as the only research tool. Considering these methodological issues, and many others that could occur in the data processing, such as the self-selection bias or relatively small sample of

respondents from each country, we prefer to use mainly the descriptive analysis to avoid the distortion of the research outcomes.

2.2. Sample description

This study was conducted on a sample of 1,800 journalists from 360 national, regional, and local media outlets. According to a common sampling procedure, in each country there were initially selected 20 media outlets under a quota scheme, and then from each media organization there were randomly chosen five journalists representing various management and non-management positions. Out of 1,800 respondents 41.88% were women and 58.12% were men, with ages between 19 and 75. A higher number of women journalists were presented in the editorial offices from Bulgaria, Chile, Romania and Russia. On the other hand, men journalists were more numerous in the German, Indonesian, Mexican, Swiss, and Ugandan media outlets. The average age of the questioned journalists was 37 years. About half of them (55.1%) held editor or reporter positions in the sampled newsrooms while about 45% were editors-in-chiefs, heads of department, senior editors or their deputies. Almost 48% of the surveyed journalists, no matter where they come from, graduated from a college or equivalent. The percentage of those who had master degrees was 25.8%. Eight out of ten practitioners were permanently employed in the media organizations they work for. 62% of the respondents had a professional experience of more than 10 years, and about 8% of them have practiced journalism for nearly 35 years. Only two out of one thousand eight hundred journalists from Austria and the United States have over 50 years of professional experience.

3. Findings and discussion

3.1. The religious orientation of journalists

The findings of the 'Worlds of Journalism' research project have revealed a quite moderate religious orientation of journalists. Only 33% of respondents reported that religion was 'extremely' and 'very' important to them. Egypt, Indonesia and Uganda were the countries with the highest level of religiousness among journalists. At the other extreme were countries such as China and Australia. 60% of Chinese journalists and 43% of Australian journalists said they are irreligious. A smaller but still significant percentage of respondents from Spain and Austria (37% and 34%) argued that religion was not important to them at all. No significant differences were recorded between men and women. Instead, the young generation of journalists, more than the old generation, supported the idea that the religion had an 'extreme' and 'very' important role in life.

Of the total number of journalists who had answered the question if they consider themselves as affiliated with any particular religion or religious denomination, one out of three journalists claimed no religious affiliation. Almost 40% of the surveyed journalists stated they were Roman Catholic, Orthodox or Protestant Christians, 14.8% - Muslims, 4.6% - Jewish, 0.6% - Hindu, and 0.4% - Buddhists. More than other religious congregations, Muslims from Egypt and Indonesia reported a higher rate of participation in religious activities of the community. The women journalists of Orthodox affiliation from Russia and Romania, more than men journalists of the same religion, described themselves as active churchgoers. On the other hand, men journalists of the Egyptian and Indonesian Muslims and Ugandan Catholics argued that they got permanently involved in religious activities.

These particular data which identify a quite low religious involvement of journalists integrate in a moderated-believer trend that characterizes some of the recent journalistic researches regarding religion [2]. One plausible explanation of these results could be, as has been noted in the introduction section of this article, the 'socially desirable answer' of journalists. Thus, if at personal level the journalists would like to present themselves as conservative and followers of religious traditions, professionally they are required to be liberal, which implies detachment from their personal beliefs. This kind of dissonance could be more or less reduced when journalists are for example religious reporters or live in a theocracy and religious states. Moreover, another aspect that must be considered in the analysis of occupational studies such as the project 'Worlds of Journalism' is the fact that the respondents fail sometimes to detach themselves from their journalistic status. They tend to explore the personal issues in terms of their professional position.

While corroborating these data with the social involvement of surveyed journalists in community life and assuming that religious people are more likely to engage in prosocial behaviour [8], we found that less than 8% of them participated constantly in the activities of NGOs, local committees and/or charity associations. 34.1% of the respondents admitted that they never attend such activities, 37.7% participated no more than once every two-three months, and 20.6% get involved only once a year. The percentage of men respondents who declared themselves interested in the social activities was higher with at least 5% than that of interviewed women. The journalists from Australia, Egypt, Indonesia, Switzerland, Uganda and United States were more socially responsive than journalists from other countries, while the Chilean, Romanian and Russian journalists had the lowest rate of social participation.

A relatively low rate of responses was registered also to the question about the importance of following the religious and family traditions. Only 35.3% of all respondents (most of them from Egypt and Indonesia) admitted to strictly follow the traditions. For about the same number of surveyed journalists, the religious or family customs were meaningless. However, when they were asked how important is for them to help people, they said almost unanimously (97.6%) that this was one of the most important aspects in their lives.

As this research outcomes show the religious prosociality of journalists are not generally determined by their religious beliefs. Practically, the moderate social participation of respondents could not necessarily be caused by their self-report of religiosity, but rather by some personal experiences motivated by the political or social contexts in their countries. The journalists' disinterest in community activities was matched also by the lack of interest in the professional association, which leads us to conclude that journalists largely avoid any form of social or professional affiliations.

3.2. The influence of religion in the journalists' activities and professional values

Trying to determine to what extent the religion had influenced the professional decisions of journalists, the respondents had to answer two types of questions. To the first question 'How much religious leaders affect your professional activities?', almost 70% of respondents answered by denying such intervention on their work decisions. Only one out of twelve journalists claimed that religious leaders are actively involved in their professional activities. A quite predictable response was given by the Egyptian and Ugandan journalists who considered the participation of religious leaders in their profession a general practice. More than by religious leaders, the respondents were influenced by the conventions and ethics of the profession (59.4%), by the news sources (58.8%), and to some extent by the sensibilities of the community covered (34.5%).

Table 1. Trust in social institutions.

| Country | Religious leaders | Parliament | The judiciary | Police | Political parties | The military | Charitable org. | News media |
|---------------|-------------------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|-------------------|--------------|-----------------|--------------|
| | Number of cases Mean | Mean | Mean | Mean | Mean | Mean | Mean | Mean |
| Australia | 1734 3.24 | 1769 2.94 | 1774 2.45 | 1768 3.01 | 1764 3.64 | 1641 2.89 | 1759 2.32 | 1763 2.91 |
| Austria | 3.51 | 2.54 | 1.95 | 2.69 | 3.70 | 2.80 | 2.19 | 2.67 |
| Brazil | 3.61 | 3.80 | 3.20 | 3.72 | 4.04 | 3.05 | 2.83 | 2.69 |
| Bulgaria | 3.76 | 3.67 | 3.94 | 3.78 | 3.96 | 3.20 | 3.15 | 2.97 |
| Chile | 2.85 | 3.00 | 3.18 | 2.24 | 4.00 | 2.65 | 2.86 | 2.52 |
| China | 3.65 | 2.31 | 2.82 | 3.17 | 2.62 | 2.28 | 2.94 | 2.72 |
| Egypt | 2.35 | 3.19 | 1.92 | 3.11 | 3.82 | - | 2.66 | 2.60 |
| Germany | 3.56 | 2.45 | 2.14 | 2.32 | 3.57 | 2.83 | 2.38 | 2.47 |
| Indonesia | 2.68 | 3.54 | 3.81 | 3.76 | 4.22 | 3.39 | 3.38 | 2.56 |
| Israel | 3.56 | 3.14 | 2.53 | 3.21 | 3.76 | 2.51 | 2.58 | 2.84 |
| Mexico | 4.04 | 3.81 | 3.75 | 4.44 | 4.22 | 2.96 | 2.73 | 2.93 |
| Romania | 3.17 | 3.93 | 3.48 | 3.59 | 4.17 | 3.05 | 2.90 | 2.81 |
| Russia | 3.12 | 3.65 | 3.71 | 3.87 | 3.90 | 3.55 | 2.95 | 3.30 |
| Spain | 4.10 | 2.59 | 2.82 | 2.69 | 3.96 | 2.92 | 2.76 | 2.98 |
| Switzerland | 3.89 | 2.54 | 2.04 | 2.48 | 3.44 | 3.41 | 2.54 | 2.63 |
| Turkey | 4.06 | 3.57 | 3.12 | 3.62 | 4.12 | 2.76 | 2.77 | 3.47 |
| Uganda | 2.35 | 3.12 | 2.56 | 3.65 | 3.68 | 3.29 | 2.80 | 2.17 |
| United States | 3.09 | 3.18 | 2.43 | 2.76 | 3.72 | 2.86 | 2.43 | 2.64 |
| Total | 3.36 | 3.17 | 2.88 | 3.23 | 3.81 | 2.97 | 2.73 | 2.77 |

Question: Please tell me on a scale of 1 to 5 how much you personally trust each of the following institutions. 1 means you have complete trust, and 5 means you do not trust an institution at all.

To the second question, the journalists had to express their trust or mistrust in many national and international institutions among which there were also religious leaders (see Table 1).

As the research data reveal, the interviewees had the highest confidence in charitable and voluntary organizations and news media, and the least trust in their national political parties. Regarding the trustworthiness of the institutions listed by countries, justice was the most trusted institution in case of the Austrian and Egyptian journalists, while the police was the least reliable for the Mexican respondents. Religious leaders have achieved an average score, which expresses distrust rather than trust. However, the Muslim and Protestant journalists said that they had more confidence in their religious leaders than journalists of other religious allegiance. Professionals from Egypt, Indonesia, and Uganda proved unvarying proclivity for religious values, as well as religious representatives.

The answer to the second question related to the journalistic roles and values indicate an obvious bias of respondents to the factual journalism. Over 70% of respondents advocated strongly for the detached observer, watchdog of government and provider of political information professional roles. These journalists supported the professional standards and values that exclude any influence on reporting and unverified information. They also considered extremely important to provide analysis of public interest that allow them to remain impartial. If these values were regarded as universal and were supported by the vast majority of respondents, the question whether journalists should be allowed to formulate their own individual codes of conduct has brought a different response among Muslim and Christian Orthodox journalists. Compared with professionals representing other denominations, the Muslims and the Orthodox showed more flexibility in formulating their own professional codes (see Table 2).

Table 2. Standards in news coverage.

| Religious denomination | | No influence on reporting | Facts speak for themselves | Remain strictly impartial | Stay away from unverified inform. | Ethical principles should be followed | Formulate own individual ethics |
|--------------------------------|------|---------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| No religion or denomination | Mean | 2.01 | 2.22 | 1.98 | 2.11 | 1.52 | 3.33 |
| Buddhist | Mean | 1.43 | 2.29 | 1.71 | 1.86 | 1.43 | 3.00 |
| Hindu | Mean | 1.56 | 2.40 | 1.67 | 2.20 | 2.00 | 3.11 |
| Jewish | Mean | 2.18 | 2.36 | 2.22 | 2.01 | 1.68 | 3.65 |
| Muslim | Mean | 1.85 | 1.99 | 1.77 | 1.74 | 1.52 | 2.42 |
| Protestant | Mean | 1.77 | 1.88 | 1.96 | 1.90 | 1.43 | 3.47 |
| Orthodox (Russian/ Greek/etc.) | Mean | 1.98 | 2.07 | 1.96 | 2.15 | 1.86 | 2.73 |
| Roman Catholic | Mean | 1.77 | 2.00 | 1.82 | 2.08 | 1.51 | 3.32 |
| Other | Mean | 1.84 | 2.11 | 1.95 | 2.38 | 1.70 | 3.14 |
| Total | Mean | 1.92 | 2.10 | 1.92 | 2.03 | 1.56 | 3.14 |

Question: Please tell me on a scale of 1 to 5 how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements. 1 means you strongly agree, 2 means somewhat agree, 3 means neither agree nor disagree, 4 means somewhat disagree, and 5 means strongly disagree.

As can be seen in the outcomes presented above, the influence of religion on journalistic activities and values depends to a great extent on socio-political contexts of the countries in which journalists activated. The respondents from the countries which were more religiously oriented showed a higher degree of religious influence on their professional values and of trust in religious leaders in comparison to the journalists from states with moderate religiosity. These journalists did not regard their professional values as an exclusive attribute of the journalistic profession. On the contrary, they delegated the right to set their professional values to other institutions, including religious ones. Not the same thing happened with the journalists from countries which claimed a decreased level of religiosity and low trust in religious representatives. Being mostly represented in this study, these professionals revealed a strong support for unbiased journalism excluding any external intervention. This does not mean that some of these journalists are less religious, but they probably considered that the intervention of religion in their work might endanger their professional integrity. Both perspectives are equally valid as long as they are analyzed in a proper context.

4. Conclusions

The results of the international research project ‘Worlds of Journalism’ partially confirm the hypothesis that the journalists prove a very strong religious orientation in their personal lives, while professionally they are guided by the organizational standards that are sometimes opposed to their religious values. Although the outcomes show that the influence of religion in the professional routines of journalists is much lower than in their private life, the religious beliefs of journalists proved to be also quite moderate, with few exceptions (Muslims from Egypt and Indonesia and Christians from Uganda).

As any quantitative study, this research had several limitations that have prevented in-depth analysis of the contexts in which responses were provided. Nevertheless this project was one of the first attempts to bring together the journalists’ representations about religion from so many countries with a diverse religious heritage and it will probably be a head start for increasing the research interest in such topics.

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