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DIFFERENTIATION
When more sometimes means less

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Introduction
In this chapter, I will discuss differentiation as it relates specifically to the practice of reporting concerning religion. While I will include ideas and currents, which are widespread, my own experience and many of the examples I will use center on the Canadian media and religious landscapes. In order to shed light on theories, which involve different concepts of differentiation, I will also concentrate on the nuts-and-bolts issues involved in the professional practice of journalism about religion, particularly by mainstream, established, legacy news outlets. This will also be somewhat limited in that one can only speak with some confidence about journalism as it has been and is currently done; today, the speed of technological and economic change is so rapid that the timelines involved in publication of a book make this a dangerous enterprise! However, as historians of journalism have suggested (e.g., Pavlik 2000), there are patterns to the way in which journalism has adapted to technological changes which may suggest paradigms with future value.

What are we talking about when we talk about differentiation in the realm of reporting on religion?

For the purposes of this chapter, I will discuss differentiation in the following ways: as an evolution of media platforms, as a diversity of points of view, as a change in the definition of religion and finally, as a personalization of news consumption.

To state the obvious, reporting on religion exists differently around the world, and even within the same nation, it may differ between privately-owned and publicly-funded news outlets. Therefore, at the outset, I note that I write as one who is familiar primarily with the systems in place in North America, Western Europe and parts of Africa. These are all, to some extent, influenced by colonial histories of publishing and broadcasting, as well as the transnational reach of large media corporations and religious institutions.

Another self-evident but sometimes forgotten issue is the speed at which the differentiation of media platforms has taken place. The current multitude of forms has arrived in one quick blink as compared with the introduction of previous mediated systems used for journalism. For instance, this is the time between Gutenberg’s press and the telegraph: 1440–1832.
(over 390 years). From the telegraph to radio: 1832 to Marconi in 1894 (62 years). From radio to television: 1894 to 1936 (42 years). From television to the Web: 1989 (53 years). From Web to Facebook (2004) (15 years), to Twitter (2006) (17 years). However, it is also important to remember that none of these technologies (with the exception of the telegraph) has ceased to be used for the purpose of journalism. No matter how many times we are told that print is dead, books, newspapers and magazines all continue to exist, despite alterations in form and content. The same is true of radio, which has been given new life via the shift from analog to digital, podcasts and now through smart speakers like Amazon’s Echo and Alexa and Google’s Home devices.

Each platform introduction has modified its antecedent forms to some extent. Worried about an audience entranced with television screens, the National Enquirer tabloid rounded off the corners of their photographs, hoping to emulate those early screens (Calder 1993). Printed newspapers had to change their focus from breaking news long before the Internet, but rather with the advent of radio and particularly with the creation of 24-hour cable television news outlets. However, the idea of the newspaper as a compendium of many different types of information, organized by theme within a collection of pages has not, for the most part, changed. Even in legacy newspapers’ online editions, similar organizing principles of sections, for example, are used. Religion reporting has found its place within these printed compendiums, although not to anywhere near the same extent in the broadcast platforms.

Differentiation as it pertains to religion reporting also includes a diversity of points of view among those who disseminate the news. Returning to the specifically Canadian context, there were never a large number of journalists who specialized in reporting on religion. Before large-scale cuts to newsrooms, perhaps ten journalists at newspapers across Canada specialized in religion. Today that count is at about one. The public broadcaster has retained one radio program (Tapestry), which deals with religious/spiritual issues (McNair 2018). This dearth of specialization would suggest that there is a lack of diversity in the dissemination of news about religion. However, the converse can be argued. While religion coverage in a traditional, beat sense has all but disappeared, it continues to appear all over other news spaces, in reporting about politics, health and science, justice and education systems and arts and entertainment coverage. In this fashion, the portrayal of religion can and often does suffer from a reporter’s lack of context and knowledge. However, the way in which religion is discussed, described and framed is often novel. Someone who is fluent in political science may deal with religious behaviors and communities in a significantly different way than a cultural critic addresses the same issues as they emerge in a theatrical production.

Untethered from a traditional religion beat, these representations of religion do not conform to the traditions of a weekly religion page featuring a profile of the local Presbyterian minister, a synopsis of the most recent Anglican sermon from the presiding bishop and a report on fundraising done by the Hadassah group at the synagogue. Many religion stories in the past were tied to institutional forms of religion, so while I continue to advocate for the inclusion of journalists who can specialize in religion reporting, I also see the potential benefit of having religion freed in a differentiated media universe.

In addition to the representation of religion throughout a plethora of subject categories, there is the surge in those who are disseminating news without the training and credentials of a professional journalist. A number of members of religious groups leapfrog journalists by using Twitter and other platforms to communicate news and ideas to audiences without an intermediary reporter. Some of this is done in order to communicate directly, but in other cases, it may simply be because there are no journalists left who work on news about religion to respond to a press release.
Differentiation on the religious side begins much more slowly (and obviously started long before Gutenberg’s invention), but there is a somewhat similar trajectory in terms of increasing schisms and appearances of new denominations and movements. Then suddenly, in some corners of the world, a relatively quick emergence of – if not secularism – then the *nones* who defy easy categorization. In the Canadian situation, between 1985 and 2010 the percentage of individuals declaring no religion as part of the Canadian General Social Surveys went from 10.5% to 23.8%, an increase of 126.7% over 25 years (Wilkins-Laflamme 2015, 478). At first glance, this may look like consolidation, but sociologists have been quick to point out that the statistical groupings hide deep differences between atheists and those who believe in God, describe themselves as spiritual and/or have some form of ritual practice (Pew Research Center 2013, Bibby 2017). This phenomenon has itself provided many occasions for reporting, as journalists try to communicate the latest demographics of belief to Canadians. Also in the Canadian case, there has been an increase in those who identify as having some form of Indigenous spiritual belief and/or practice. Albeit a relatively small number – 5% of Indigenous people identified using this category in the 2011 National Household Survey – this is still a significant portion given the attempted eradication of such spirituality by colonial governments (Statistics Canada n.d.). It too is a type of differentiation of religion in the form of reclamation.

With the erosion of traditional collections of news – the newspaper, the evening television newscast – individual pieces of news float in a sea of other kinds of information, including entertainment of all kinds. News pieces about religion may bob to the surface of an individual’s personalized pond of information where it might otherwise not have appeared. However, it can also mean that unless there is some serendipitous event, the chances of it being seen on someone’s Facebook timeline could be less than had it appeared in a specifically constructed newspaper section. Unlike the guarantee of a specific section for religion news, few may see one-off stories, unless given popular metatags, or having some other attribute, which will make it go viral. This personalization of news is yet another form of differentiation.

**What are the implications/consequences of differentiation or journalism about religion?**

In 1996, a freelance journalist named Heather Robertson launched what became a class action suit against the owners of *The Globe and Mail*, one of Canada’s national newspapers. While the suit dealt with the issue of freelance contracts, an interesting aspect became a ruling on whether the collection of stories, which we call a newspaper, is a thing in and of itself – more than the simple sum of its parts. The case eventually ended up in Canada’s Supreme Court, with a 2006 ruling which gave Robertson and her freelance colleagues most of what they asked for in terms of contracts recognizing subsequent uses of their work in databases. The element that is of particular interest for this chapter, however, is the concept of *collective work*. This issue was also at the heart of a similar American case, known as the New York Times Co. versus Tasini. Here is the relevant passage from the Canadian Supreme Court ruling:

(...) a substantial part of a newspaper may consist only of the original selection so long as the essence of the newspaper is preserved. The task of determining whether this essence has been reproduced is largely a question of degree but, at a minimum, the editorial content of the newspaper — the true essence of its originality — must be preserved and
presented in the context of that newspaper. Here, in (two databases), the originality of
the freelance articles is reproduced, but the originality of the newspapers is not. The
newspaper articles are decontextualized to the point that they are no longer presented
in a manner that maintains their intimate connection with the rest of that newspaper.
Viewed “globally”, these databases are compilations of individual articles presented out-
side of the context of the original collective work from where they originated. The
resulting collective work presented to the public is not simply each of the collective
works joined together — it is a collective work of a different nature. The references to
the newspaper where the articles were published, the date they were published and the
page number where they appeared merely provide historical information.

(Robertson v. Thomson Corp 2006)

The judges agreed with Robertson that the newspaper’s claim to copyright was based on
the collection of all the news articles, as well as the layout of the illustrations, and even the
accompanying advertisements and classifieds. Once the individual pieces of journalism were
digitized and collected in a database, unmoored from the specific collective context of the
newspaper, this copyright ceased to have legal power. In other words, the differentiation of
the individual pieces from the original collection was crucial to understanding ownership
under the contract.

This concept of collective work is also, I would argue, key to understanding the way in
which differentiation of reporting on religion matters. What difference does it make to have
a piece of reporting appear on a specific page? Moreover, what difference does it make to
have it appear as part and parcel of a panoply of news from a given community on a given
day?

There are obvious issues of legitimation given by the inclusion of religion reporting into
a collective work of news. The first is simply that religious ideas, beliefs, practices and com-
munities are newsworthy. There are almost as many ways of defining news, as there are ways
of defining religion, but among the key ingredients to recognizing something as newswor-
thy are: relevance, novelty, public interest, conflict, timeliness and proximity. With perhaps
the exception of novelty and conflict, these are all traits, which most religious communities
would like to have associated with themselves. To be included, then, in mainstream media,
signifies membership to some extent in the hegemonic structure of the larger community
served by the news outlet.

Also important is the editorial decision-making involved in situating a religion story. As
recognized by the Canadian Supreme Court ruling, a key component to the essence of the
newspaper is the conscious choice to place a story in a particular spot, with specific space al-
lotment, in conjunction or disjunction with other information and advertisements. The same
is true of a traditional radio or television news broadcast: Choices are made about the order
in which stories will appear, and about the language the news presenter/anchor will use to
introduce and segue between one story and another. All of these choices can serve to elevate
or even be dismissive of a representation of religion. In North American news broadcasts, for
example, there is often a story identified as a kicker, which ends the show. These kickers are
selected often because they are humorous, surprising, or somehow uplifting. To have a sub-
ject involving religion appear in this slot is to give the audience a cue as to how to interpret
the story. So, for example, stories like one which closed a CTV newscast in January 2007 on
the celebration of Orthodox Christmas in Moscow served as an interesting tidbit and some-
what exotic look at traditions from far away as well as a discussion of Orthodox traditions
among atheists (Pinchuk 2007). How this might influence a viewer’s thinking about their
Canadian neighbors who also celebrate according to the Orthodox calendar is unknown, but its placement at the end of the newscast of 13 stories made it clear that it was not a hard news story demanding attention.

This example illustrates another important fact about religion reporting within a collective work. In printed form, a reader would have had the opportunity to page through other news, which would provide tangible context to a story. This could be as simple—and important—as considering what else was happening that day which was considered newsworthy. This deep-seated connection is even more the case in a traditional newscast, where the listener has no option but to experience the stories as they appear in the consecutive order created by producers. Such decisions create specific groupings of content (sports, for instance), as well as prominence (the most important at the beginning), as well as implied as well as stated connections between one story and another (to give an example: a news report might say: ‘...and here at home, Canadian Hindus are also celebrating Diwali...’).

In an age of platform differentiation, journalists are being trained to think about audience analytics, about search engine optimization (SEO) and about social media engagement and community interaction. Some of this is based on legacy categories (beats or specialty reporting), which may well leave out religion altogether, given the disappearance of this beat prior to the careers of many of those now working in newsrooms. Not only are we in a post-institutional religious age, but in a time when religion beats (at least in Canada) are remembered only by the middle-aged in a newsroom.

Some of these measures (like engagement and community interaction) may be considered linked to the collective work of a news outlet in post-2005 journalistic practice. But in large part, they emphasize individual pieces of journalism and how each can attract views which may be monetized. With few religion specialists (at least at mainstream outlets), columnists who write often on religious topics may succeed in having social media followings. However, this is religion as seen through an opinion-editorial lens, not straight-ahead reporting.

With shrinking resources (human and financial) in newsrooms, there is a heavy reliance on wire service reporting (material coming from the likes of Reuters, Agence France Press, Associated Press, etc.). In Canadian news, this result in a lot of representations of religion, but most originate from outside Canada, and most fit frames of war, conflict and exotic travel.

The wire services also supply the bulk of visuals used in news reporting. This results in the same images (still and moving) showing up in multiple and global news sources. This replication can sometimes be dangerous in the way it amplifies incorrect or less than context-rich reporting about religion. Apart from the ubiquity of these stories across platforms, the services’ use of meta data to classify stories is also powerful. Stories are disseminated with accompanying keywords and classifications, including religious ones. If journalists are required to perform a taxonomy when creating news, it is crucial to have them understand the nuances of spiritual and religious aspects of life (Smith 2018).

There are also many more opportunities for stories to be incorrect, or at least, poorly re-interpreted. A long story written for print or long-form online text may be advertised via a Tweet re-written to include hashtags. Each time the story is touched by an editorial worker, there is a chance of getting the gist as well as the details wrong, not to mention the introduction of sensationalism. Bielsa and Bassnett (2009) describe the chain of production involved in getting a story from the originating reporter, through a wire service, to a variety of subscribing news outlets and finally, to the news consumer. Add in language translations and the pressures of deadlines and the odds of mistakes being made are increased.

The concerns noted above are particularly important for international news about religion. It is important to acknowledge the hollowing out of local news in much of the
world (Long 2017). Where once the collective work approach would signal the paucity of local reporting about religion (if for no other reason than noting the thick foreign news section versus the thin local pages), the differentiated digital story bits make that less obvious. Unless one is looking for such reporting, one may not even notice its absence. Traditionally, the daily local newscast and newspaper are where stories about the local performance and simple presence of religion as it intersects with public life are found. However, increasingly, local newspapers as well as regional broadcasters are disappearing, taking with them the church pages, the news about charitable work and the obituaries/wedding/birth notices that often included mentions of religious communities.

In the early part of this century, much hope was placed in the ability of news to become hyperlocal, as well as in the rise of citizen journalists. Both of these could be seen as methods of differentiation. Nevertheless, although the technological ability for anyone to create such content online was made available, the promise goes mostly unfulfilled. Monetization has remained a challenge and often it is all-too-late that there is the recognition of the amount of work, time and skill necessary to make a hyperlocal and/or citizen journalism project succeed. Religious groups and movements have been able to create their own online presence, but this has not proven to have the same widespread reach as information written about them by enquiring, professional journalists.

On a more positive note, there is now true potential for freelancers to report without the need for or constrictions of a beat. Some reporters can carve out a niche for themselves online by developing expertise on a religious theme or community. Whether or not they can also make enough money to stay afloat is another question. Another positive stemming from digital differentiation is the opportunity for news about religion to exist and be consumed by anyone anywhere. However, as we have seen from the circulation of fake news, it also is easy for misinformation and outright hate to proliferate.

Niche forms of religion journalism continue to be launched, some with longer shelf lives than others. In 2014, the Boston Globe started Crux, a website devoted to reporting on Roman Catholicism. Eighteen months later, it ended its involvement, turning the site over to Editor John Allen (it now runs with support from Catholic organizations, which leaves questions about its editorial independence) (Green 2016). However, print publications devoted to religion continue to survive if not thrive, among them Geez magazine, which describes itself as:

Christian (or post-Christian, depends how narrow your categories are) but not in a way that offends those who are overdosed on Sunday School simplifications. We answer ideology with mischief rather than with more ideology.

(Geez n.d.)

A quarterly, the magazine is over five years old, which is a significant accomplishment, particularly for one published within Canada, and outside of the supports of an institutional religious organization.

Examples of differentiated journalism about religion

In giving specific form to these ideas, I will use reporting on Indigenous spirituality in Canada to provide some examples. As noted earlier in this chapter, the number of people who identify in this way is relatively small. However, I will also include stories about Christianity as practiced by Indigenous people. Such stories are particularly newsworthy in the
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Canadian context, following two major federal public inquiries. The first is known as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission or TRC and dealt with the residential school system, in which thousands of children were taken away from their families and educated in institutions run mainly by Christian denominations at the behest of the federal government. Serious physical, emotional, sexual and spiritual abuse occurred at the individual level, including deaths among the children. At the systemic level, the residential schools aimed to destroy cultural, linguistic and spiritual Indigeneity, forcing assimilation into a Christian, euro-centric style of life. The resulting intergenerational trauma continues to plague many Indigenous peoples. The second inquiry focuses on Indigenous girls and women who have been murdered or remain missing (known as the MMIW inquiry). Much of this coverage also is related to the residential school system, as well as other systemic racism, which has characterized the relationship between the Canadian government, non-Indigenous Canadians and Indigenous peoples.

The stories coming out of the public hearings have been covered, and the inquiries themselves have pushed Canadian news outlets (and journalism schools) to give more and better attention to Indigenous issues. Given this environment, I will look at how reporting about religious and spiritual practices among Indigenous peoples are covered in a differentiated news universe.

The first form of differentiation I will discuss in this context is that one among media platforms. There were several longer features, particularly dealing with the justice issues of the murdered and missing women inquiry and the TRC, but a lot of the news has also come through visual storytelling. For example, at times when the commissions were engaged in public hearings, digital photo galleries would feature pictures of people in regalia, or those testifying, often in tears, holding an eagle feather. These photographs are disseminated online, with only a caption describing the place and giving the person’s name. Seldom would there be any description of the importance of the eagle feather. Many different First Nations recognize eagle feathers as important spiritual objects, which may signal the person who holds them as being connected to the Creator or having the status of a warrior, for example. But although these photos were ubiquitous, appearing within photo galleries, or accompanying a longer story (many of them originating from only a few photographers, circulated by The Canadian Press wire service), there was almost never any mention of such symbols’ use or spiritual meaning. Captions like this are common:

PAIN AND PASSION – Terry Ladue holds an eagle feather to his face Thursday after speaking of the murder of his mother, Jane Dick, at the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls in Whitehorse. Photo by the Canadian Press/Jonathan Hayward.

While Ladue is the central character in the story written by Sidney Cohen, nowhere in the text does it give more information about why he might be photographed clutching the feather. Part of this is due to yet another form of differentiation; many mainstream newsrooms have cut in-house photographers, which results in a disconnect between the visuals and the texts, unless the reporters contribute both.

Visual journalism as it pertains to religion has unfortunately often been limited to representations of the exotic (full-color photos of Hindu firewalking festivals for a travel feature story) or shorthand (the anonymous woman in hijab to illustrate a story about Islam, even if no women appear in the report itself). This is often also the case when applied to reporting
about Indigenous peoples. Journalist Duncan McCue has described the stereotypical tropes as the W (warrior) and 4Ds: drumming, dancing, drunk or dead (McCue n.d.). Given the ignorance of most Canadians about spiritual practices among Indigenous peoples, including basic information to correspond with visuals would be a significant step forward for better understanding and certainly aid in the project of reconciliation.

The various forms of differentiation I earlier identified are often intertwined. The multiplicity of media platforms is also an opportunity for the differentiation of points of view. For example, one might look at the way in which the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls issue is covered via Instagram. Searching for the #mmiwg hashtag at the time of this writing brings up 5,743 posts on the site. Immediately a number of aspects are apparent: The content straddles American and Canadian stories and movements (the Canadian news coverage seldom considers MMIW issues elsewhere) which makes sense, particularly since many Indigenous peoples do not recognize the national borders in North America as taking precedence over traditional lands. The other is the variety of artistic postings, many of which include spiritual content. For example, an image of red paint including the words “No More Stolen Sisters #MMIWG” was posted on 17 May 2018 by bunkhaus, who identifies as Pawnee from Oklahoma. He posts:

My studio is special to me. I approach my time here with a great deal of reverence, often praying and smudging before getting to work. Tonight, while waiting for paint to dry on a canvas, I created an impromptu work on paper. The reality of violence against Native women has been weighing on my thoughts quite a bit. I hope and pray for equity in this life time, so that we may move beyond the atrocities and loss in our history (and in this era) and heal...to not just survive, but to thrive.

(Echo-Hawk 2018)

The visual nature of Instagram and the use of related hashtags is a good example of the differentiation of points of view, which are made possible by differentiated media platforms. Some mainstream news outlets are using this social media vehicle to tell stories, but more often, it is non-journalists who (in addition to posting upcoming events) are using it to disseminate their own information. Moreover, in the case of Indigenous spiritual practice, it does not take much browsing of the #MMIWG Instagrams to reveal a number of examples.

Instagram, like other forms of social media, has become not only a means of storytelling for journalists and non-journalists, but also a resource for journalists to get story ideas and sources for their work. The recursive nature of social media both serves to differentiate as well as in some sense democratize the representation of religious practices and belief in and out of mainstream news media.

As mentioned earlier, there is a single Canadian newspaper reporter who still specializes in religion reporting, although Douglas Todd’s current bio notes that he “specializes in migration, ethics, diversity, spirituality and psychology, while remaining curious about most everything else” (Vancouver Sun 2018). What is also notable is that he both reports on issues as well as serves as a columnist, blurring the lines (at least for some readers) between balanced reporting and opinionated writing. But it is only someone like Todd, with long expertise in writing about religion, who would even see the value in a story about Indigenous people who are members of the Baha’i community (Todd 2018). He also has written about the majority of Indigenous people who continue to identify as Christians, despite the residential school legacy. In a 2016 piece, he featured a number of deacons and clerics of Indigenous heritage (Todd 2016).
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To complete this short consideration of the differentiation of voices and perspectives possible because of the differentiation of media platforms, I will turn to the format used to mediate the stories of suffering from residential school survivors and those of family members who testified at the MMIW inquiry. Many of these people have had their stories relayed in public settings, as well as broadcast and reported on. Here is one description of an April 2013 Montreal hearing:

Despite the sensitive nature of [Mary Shecapio] Blacksmith’s testimonial, the sharing circle where she gave her statement was a public and highly mediated affair. The hotel salon in which she spoke was packed with approximately one hundred onlookers, including news reporters typing hurriedly on laptops and academics pointing voice recorders at the speakers and feverishly taking field notes. The audience also included Indigenous attendees, other residential school survivors, and interested members of the public. Camera technicians weaved in and out of the audience with hand-held devices and rolled around larger equipment on wheels. During Blacksmith’s talk, five cameras slowly orbited around the circle as their operators attempted to capture the best angle.

(Brady and Kelly 2017, 32)

The demands of the TRC itself, trying to squeeze in as many testimonials as possible while still keeping to a timetable and deadline for conclusion also meant a change in the nature of the testimonies. The time constraints were not appreciated by everyone:

Mary Shecapio Blacksmith stated, ‘But since I have only ten minutes, I’ll just make my story shorter than I usually do.’ TRC commissioners themselves expressed frustration at the time limit. During his opening remarks one morning in Montreal, Chief Wilton Littlechild commented, ‘We always seem to be running after time. We always seem to be in a hurry to get nowhere. We’re starting to pick up the habits of our white brothers.’

(Brady and Kelly 2017, 45)

In their work, Brady and her colleagues contrast this approach to that adopted by Isuma TV, an Inuit media project co-founded by Zacharias Kunuk, known for making Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner, a 2001 Canadian film. Isuma TV featured school survivors sitting for as much as an hour at a time; interviewed by Peter Irniq, who included questions about non-Christian culture and traditions.

Isuma TV testimonials were created in part as a vehicle for demonstrating the importance of Inuit-specific experiences in the TRC and of conducting Inuit testimonies in their own languages and communities. At one point, because of the TRC’s rocky start, and the uncertainty about whether Inuit experiences would be fully included, Irniq believed that Inuit would ‘have to tell their stories through another media [sic].’ The resulting archive provided a window into what Inuit residential school testimonies could look like if they operated outside of the state apparatus.

(Brady and Kelly 2017, 77)

This differentiation from the state-sponsored form of inquiry, via a non-state media project is particularly powerful, given that the residential schools were a state project themselves.

Changing the definition of religion is yet another form of differentiation. While some of this originates in the kind of citizen journalism found on Instagram and via media projects...
like *Isuna TV*, some of the most nuanced comes from those journalists who are skilled and experienced in reporting on spirituality. *Tapestry*, a long-running weekly CBC radio show, once dealt specifically with religion as institutionally understood, but now it advertises itself as:

*Tapestry exists to go deep. We investigate the messy, complicated, and sometimes absurd nature of life, through the lenses of psychology, philosophy, religion and spirituality.*  
(CBC 2018a)

This broadening of definition gives the producers and host latitude to include a variety of non-institutional versions of religion or spirituality. Continuing the focus on Indigenous issues, consider the episode named “Lacrosse: The Creator’s Game,” which aired in February 2018 (CBC 2018b).

Part of the episode discusses the healing power of lacrosse. The idea of healing shows up several times in reporting of all types about the TRC and MMIW inquiries, but it is seldom elaborated upon. As a concept, the word healing in English can suggest multiple aspects: the physical, the emotional, the communal and the spiritual. How it operates for Indigenous peoples, whose traditional spirituality does not operate along a secular/sacred, physical/spiritual divide, is not always well articulated in reporting. This results, I would suggest, in some misunderstandings when Indigenous people use the term healing when speaking with journalists. It is a good example of the benefits of having a reporter who specializes in religion, who might interrogate and probe further when this word is used, to make certain that they convey the full meaning of the term as best they can.

In the lacrosse episode, *Tapestry* host Mary Hynes gives her guests ample time to describe and discuss the healing aspects of the sport. She interviews scholar and lacrosse player, Allan Downey and Amy Lazore and Terri Swamp. All three are Indigenous people.

In this 54 minutes of radio, the idea of Indigenous spirituality as a form of religion is given credence, despite the fact that it does not fit the institutional definition. As a type of long-form journalism, there is ample time for a discussion of ideas, which are not dependent on SEO or snappy visuals. The journalists involved ensure that the majority of the time features the Indigenous interviewees who tell their own stories, share their own scholarship and their own understandings of spirituality. Finally, the program facilitates this through serious consideration of a sport, something, which would seldom have found a spot in the traditional church pages of a newspaper’s religion section.

The final form of differentiation considered here is personalization of news about religion. The mysterious and yet powerful Facebook algorithms are one important mechanism of personalization. Recent to this writing, Facebook announced a return to a family/friends emphasis rather than posts from news and other organizations. What will this mean for religion news? Will there be even more entrenchment to the *filter bubbles* of religion as well as politics and class? What of the suggestion that this change may make even more space for fake news and conspiracy theories, many of which paint religious adherents in the worst light (Ingram 2018)? The identification of Facebook and Twitter as news platforms is problematic. The companies themselves refuse to take up this mantle, in so doing avoiding many of the responsibilities placed on journalists and news organizations, even as they have become key conduits of this type of information. The erosion of transparent fact-checking and gatekeeping functions has been exacerbated by social media platforms. Yet, digital dissemination of news about religion has meant a simultaneous rise of accountability and non-accountability.
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Theoretically, no piece of reporting can go without being fact-checked by people around the world. Comments sections under stories are often much longer than the journalism which occasions them. Sadly, they are often not particularly useful or helpful in terms of information dissemination. Indeed, in 2015 the CBC decided to remove the comment function from any pages dealing with Indigenous news because of the constant appearance of racist responses (CBC 2015). But simultaneously, the differentiation and splintering of the modes of communication has also resulted in widespread errors and complete fabrications.

Conclusion: how might differentiation continue/change and how will this challenge journalism about religion in the future?

The universe may expand forever, but can social media and other digital forms? As noted in the opening of this chapter, we have witnessed an exponential surge in technological advances, but at some point, will this slow to more minor advances as our physical and mental senses fall short of adapting to new media platforms? Or as has happened with search engines and the primacy of Google, will we revert to some kind of aggregator to simplify/curate/gatekeep the tides of info? Note that already individual stories, including those involving religion, often combine a multitude of staff and wire and social media sources (see examples of the Charlie Hebdo shooting in Smith 2018).

What may happen if the legacy media brands continue to erode, and there is a continued rise of freelancers? What does this mean in terms of beat journalism and specialty reporting?

One of the biggest challenges to reporting on religion is the opposite of differentiation: Despite the plethora of platforms, the original reporting is shrinking. There are an increasing number of sources using the same materials (text, video and audio) from the Associated Press and Reuters (Paterson 2011). Fewer people are creating fewer stories that are being distributed to many more platforms than previously. At what point do (paying) consumers return to an appreciation of the content and its creators? And can news about religion be part of this return? As someone who is devoted to journalism and particularly religion reporting, I sincerely hope so, but given the current prevalence of apathy and distrust of excellent journalism, it is difficult to chart out a route to such a return.

In discussing the reporting of Indigenous spirituality in Canada, there is no doubt that having more journalists who are themselves Indigenous is benefiting the reporting of such content. Canada’s public broadcaster as well as private media outlets are all making Indigenous issues a priority; it remains to be seen if this attention will be sustained in the decades to come. However, I would argue that the ability to report on the way Indigenous spirituality exists in Canada could be an intrinsic and important part of the reconciliation process. In addition, excellent reporting of this reclamation of spirituality could suggest ways for journalists to report on the most differentiated religious phenomenon: the none. Learning to listen to people’s experiences, histories and stories as they exist outside (and/or in reaction to) institutional religions should result in diverse, interesting journalism.

It may be precisely because the religion beat has dissolved that such reporting can and will take on more nuance and accuracy. No longer bound by the concepts of religion as developed by colonists in large part to facilitate and justify racist and genocidal colonial projects (Chidester 1996), including those leading to what is today Canada, stories about Indigenous spirituality can be disseminated outside of the conceptual and literal confines of the religion page. No longer can an assigning editor decide what gets to be printed within that section of the newspaper and in so doing, decide what gets covered overall. The monopoly mainstream news outlets had on gatekeeping and agenda setting, including for religious issues, ended.
with the creation of the Web. Now, so long as the all-important SEO needs and metatags are included, a report can thrive on its own merits.

Finally, and crucially, the trust factor will need to be resurrected if reporting about religion is to survive. Perhaps in parallel with attempts to revive local news and so restore trust at the ground level, so too may coverage of religion aid in the renewal of the social contract between citizens and journalists. One need only think of the importance placed on the watchdog role of reporters in the investigative work uncovering clerical abuse celebrated in a film like Spotlight to see that there is still an appetite for journalism on religion and religious institutions. An increased interest in authenticity of all types cannot but make room for religious and spiritual experiences as well.

Note

1 I note here that Mary Hynes may have been a particularly sympathetic journalist to this approach as she spent many years as a sports reporter.

Further readings


Rasmussen, T., 2008. Panel Discussion II: Culture and Media Technology. The Internet and Differentiation in the Political Public Sphere. Nordicom Review, 29(2), 73–83. As journalism operates within and in many ways still facilitates the public sphere, this discussion of differentiation helps to situate reporting within political discourse.

References


Differentiation: when more sometimes means less


