RELIGION AND JOURNALISM IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD

A journalist’s perspective

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Introduction

What does it mean to be a religion journalist in an increasingly globalized world? What constitutes religious or spiritual news, how is it packaged and circulated and for whom? How have interfaith and intrafaith issues been changing religion and news about religion in the world? These questions, my subject here, should tantalize anyone who writes about religion or wants to. This chapter begins with a brief survey of humankind’s relationship with news and how sharing the news evolved into journalism, a universe of multiple venues mirroring the world in which we live.

We then consider the global influence of two new tools – the computer and the World Wide Web. The digital revolution has upended everything we know about news and journalism, including news about religion by both religious and secular writers. What does the journalist writing about religion need to know in this brave new world? The second half of this chapter profiles two interfaith projects and how they handle news about religion – United Religions Initiative (URI) and The Interfaith Observer (TIO).

All the news that is fit to print

Hearing that this handbook on religion and journalism with a section on globalization would include perspectives from journalists as well as from academics was a happy surprise. My appreciation was tempered as I began wrestling with what I mean with words like news and journalism. This is a fluid environment, wrapped in layers of cultural differences and morphing technologies. Precise definitions can get fuzzy, particularly if you want to know what it actually means to be a journalist writing about religion, what qualifies as faith and interfaith news in our globalized world and how to establish your voice in the midst of the cacophony.

News

The Oxford Living Dictionary-English on the Internet starts exploring news with this definition: “Newly received or noteworthy information, especially about recent events” (Oxford University Press 2018a). It is an epistemological kind of word insofar as it focuses...
on the act of learning, of knowing – what we know and how and when we know it. Know about what, though? News today can be about anything from the smallest electron to the next election or whatever subject your heart desires. What is worth pointing out at the start is that developing technologies from pen and ink to the printing press to digital platforms and the Internet have radically magnified our access to what we know. Go back 700 years, and almost no one but the very wealthy and powerful had access to any news except the stories travelers told. Today web browsers push us to the opposite end of the spectrum. Now not only is news about almost everything accessible, but so much is available – the good, the bad and the ugly, often all at once. It can be hard to get your bearings in this maelstrom of knowing. In philosophical lingo, in less than a millennium, humankind has gone from epistemological famine to epistemological cornucopia.

With news, the only real boundary, historically, is fiction. News is nonfiction, period. What does nonfiction include? In the newspaper I read every morning, you will find local and international news, feature stories (on food, gardening, travel, the arts and more), financial stories and stats, sports stories and stats, opinion pages, obituaries, cartoons and advertisements.

As is widely reported, fewer and fewer publications can support so rich a daily diet, especially in print. The advent of radio in the 1920s was a body blow to print journalism, with television and the Internet even mightier foes. Prior to television, it is reported that the average US American read several newspapers a day. No more. Around the world, most people are getting their news from their most important device, a smartphone, which potentially offers much more than the morning paper I love, if you go look for it.

Journalism and technology

If news comes with philosophical connotations, journalism is something fat and saucy, a powerful sector in our civil life serving for both good and ill, working on behalf of the truth and for another dollar. Journalism’s power is fed by the personal and public need to know what we do not know. One of the first systematic attempts to share news in the public square surfaced in 130 BCE in Rome. Called Acta Diurna (daily events or daily record), these acta were carved in stone or metal and posted in public places. Government news and births, obituaries and weddings were reported. Starting in the second and third centuries CE, in China, news sheets called tipao were circulated among court officials. Chinese characters telling the story were carved onto wooden blocks, inked and pressed against paper sheets. Gutenberg’s printing press emerged around 1439, a technological breakthrough that gave birth to journalism and exponentially multiplied our ability to circulate the news. For the next 300 years a profusion of broadsides, pamphlets, posters, journals, gazettes, newspapers, magazines and book appeared. By the 18th century, Europe and the USA boasted major newspapers, sending daily news to hundreds of thousands. The linotype (or hot type) machine was invented in 1886 by Ottmar Mergenthaler and supercharged newspaper printing.

Reporting the news took off in all sorts of directions with these tools. The political journalist is always a player. Investigative journalists have been called muckrakers for their exposés about political, corporate and union corruption. Publishers like William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer found great success through sensationalism, but were dubbed the so-called yellow press for their points of view. The New York Times was founded in 1851 on the principle of balanced reporting, high-quality writing and an aversion to sensation, providing journalists everywhere with a professional standard that garners respect to this day.
The difference between religious journalism and religion journalism

The oldest and still most robust form of journalism about religion comes from within religious institutions and/or traditions in what we might call religious journalism. Today most faith communities, large and small, enjoy fancy digital printers and gleaming websites. They publish and circulate newsletters, bulletins and more all through the month. Here you find a community’s storytellers, its communications crowd and the news purveyors, whose roots can go back for generations, using available technology and answering to the tradition’s authorities.

By comparison, when unaffiliated writers and secular news organizations take on religion, the writer’s frame of reference is quite different. The Religion Communicators Council (USA) each year makes two sets of awards, one for religious writers and the other for religion writers. The DeRose-Hinkhouse Memorial Awards go to active members who demonstrate excellence in religious communications and public relations for their respective communities. On a separate evening, the Wilbur Awards recognize excellence in the communication of religious issues, values and themes in secular media. On one side, religious news generated from within; on the other, religion news generated independent of religious traditions or institutions.

Journalism’s coverage of religion by the secular media was pioneered by James Gordon Bennett. A Roman Catholic Scottish immigrant in New York City, he founded the New York Herald in 1835. Within ten years, it was the most popular newspaper in the country. Bennett was the first American editor to pay close attention to religion and its institutions. The Herald published worship calendars, denominational reports and interreligious stories focused, for instance, on women’s rights, temperance and the abolition of slavery. By being independent, outside of any religious institution, Bennett felt free to criticize a congregation’s lavish Christmas decorations, conservative pronouncements from Rome or the passionate judgments of itinerant pastors. Bennett created a new voice that could go where the typical religious journalist, answering to a bishop or a board of trustees, might fear to tread.

The nation followed in Bennett’s footsteps. For decades local news sources across the country published church (if not synagogue) schedules, featured weekly opinion pieces from local clergy and wrote about church-community relations. By the middle of the 20th century, local interest in religion started a slow decline. After the 1960s, religion almost disappeared in the secular American press. The pendulum began tipping the other way in the 1990s. This rebirth in interest came just as high technology was transforming the world and how we deliver news, including news about religion.

From whose point of view?

Before diving into the complexities of globalization, religion and journalism today, we need to consider the point-of-view of the writer, whether religious or secular, whenever a news story about religion is assigned.

The well-intended journalistic quest for balanced reporting can run amuck and distort rather than balance the news. Balancing can connote fair and accurate coverage, as exemplified in high quality journalism. Too often, though, balance sloppily presupposes that whenever you have two or more conflicting narratives, witnesses or evidence, you simply give equal time to every possibility. Or, worse, you give up balance altogether to favor your editor’s preference or an advertiser’s point of view. Bad reporting; distorted news. Best practice suggests a passion for accuracy, fairness, perspective and perseverance.
Traditionally, the professional journalist sought to go the next step, setting aside all personal prejudice, allegiances and assumptions, to record the bare facts as clearly and accurately as possible. The journalist, to ensure objectivity, needs to stay out of the story. Mastering these conditions guarantees a true story, an accurate narrative, an omniscient narrator we should trust, went the argument.

As many have pointed out in recent postmodern decades, that is way too easy a path to the truth. Every writer comes with assumptions and values, with life-shaping experiences, with a personal point of view. To think you can abandon your perspective, walk in on a story like the one a blank slate rid of all cultural judgments and tell an accurate story seems utterly misguided. That said, most journalists, including religion journalists, would agree on the need to be as fair-minded and accurate with their content as possible. Fairness and accuracy are a journalist’s most important traits, whether or not you are working to be objective. If you are making up stories, call it fiction. Addressing fake news as an accusation and as a serious problem is beyond the scope of this chapter, but clearly, it is a nasty complication thrown into the complex workings of daily, digital journalism and a dramatic reminder of how important fairness and accuracy remain in our communications.

**Literary journalism and religion**

The most important challenge to traditional journalistic standards concerns allowing the author, implicitly or explicitly, into the text. Is it mandatory for journalists to remain invisible, out of the story, as they strive to be as objective as possible? Professional journalists, reporting the daily news, probably will say yes, for which morning paper readers can be thankful. Yet a multitude of gifted nonfiction writers chooses to demur. Is there a place where authors can share stories where they are deeply engaged themselves, using the first person (or not), using symbolism, clearly bringing values and a personal vision to the writing? And still call it journalism?

Starting back in the 1980s, journalists who enter into a story, telling it from a particular point of view, came to be called literary journalists in a movement also called creative nonfiction and New Journalism. This approach combines factual reporting with the narrative techniques and stylistic language traditionally found in fiction. In 1984, Norman Sims published *The Literary Journalists*, where he notes in the introduction:

> Literary journalists follow their own set of rules. Unlike standard journalism, literary journalism demands immersion in complex, difficult subjects. The voice of the writer surfaces to show readers that an author is at work.

(Sims 1984)

Sometimes the writer becomes an explicit actor in the story, sometimes not. Sims (1984) suggests that while this new genre changes the traditional rules, it embodies principles that give the writing its accountability: “Literary journalism draws on immersion, voice, accuracy, and symbolism as essential forces.” Alissa Wilkinson notes how well literary journalism can work for religion writers:

Literary religion journalism … operates mostly outside any plausibility structures guided by one particular faith, but it also does not actively reject religion or ignore the existence of things beyond the writer. Both secular and religious reporters have been freed from the need to be ‘objective’, freed to be involved with the subject matter, one way or
another, while reporting the ‘news’. Permission has been given to work from a variety of viewpoints instead of being ruled by religious authorities or ‘objective’ anonymity. It does not presume that a ‘scientific’ approach to the world – one which deals only in empirically verifiable ‘realities’ – is the legitimate one for grown-ups, while considering religion as a nice hobby for some people to mess around with at home and on weekends. (Wilkinson 2014)

Therefore, new kinds of freedom for writers emerge. Of course, both secular and sacred institutions usually generate the checks that keep journalists working and will have considerable say regarding which religion stories to write.

Technology, globalization and writing about religion

Sixty years ago, the English-speaking Sunday worship hour at Bangkok’s International Church let out at 6:00 in the evening. Teenagers in Sunday school, released at the same time, raced past the sanctuary, through the courtyard and out to our family cars. Jumping in, we turned on the radio and listened to that week’s update of the Top 40 from the USA, 12,000 miles away. If Elvis Presley’s *Heartbreak Hotel* captured me, I had to wait a week to hear it again and hope it kept its rank. Today, by contrast, I googled the song and 1.52 million responses surfaced in under a second.

The Oxford English Dictionary says globalization is “the process by which businesses or other organizations develop international influence or start operating on an international scale” (Oxford University Press 2018b). Historically, operating on an international scale was a long-term project enjoyed by a privileged few. Starting in 1600, the East India Company spent a century in commerce on the way to establishing a colony that lasted until 1947, binding together England and India, the East and the West. By contrast, Facebook was created in 2004 and at this writing, 14 years later, has 2.19 billion followers, a bit under a third of humankind.

I remember seeing Evan Golder at a Northern California Nevada United Church of Christ (UCC) annual conference in 1982 unpacking his new Osborne 1, the first truly portable computer. Golder went on to edit the denomination’s national newspaper, *United Church News*. It won journalism awards until the costs of paper-and-ink distribution forced it onto the web, where it faded away. Today a robust set of digital communication tools keeps the UCC connected to its members. The task, however, is increasingly difficult because vital religious communities these days tend to promote grassroots relationships (and stories) at the expense of national or international affiliations.

Digital technology has changed everything, starting with the computer, evolving into the World Wide Web and now beginning to encompass every corner of our daily lives. Meanwhile the compulsive need for new news is inexorable. Once upon a time powerful sermons could generate wide public attention. They could be newsworthy then, though rarely today, when a Tweet can attract millions and anyone can assume a pulpit-voice. The tools themselves represent unparalleled resources and a gigantic increase in the capacity to reach multitudes, but they have a leveling effect as well. Reaching 100,000 readers may be thrilling, but others are out there are doing just as well and maintaining your constituency is a daily challenge.

Social media adds a new arena that creates virtual communities within the digital community, gatherings that were impossible until now. Communication within and among these groups is rich territory for any writer with a gift of words who wants to explore faith and
spirituality. Anyone who wants to enter the arena can do so, but this incredibly egalitarian access is no free ticket to fame. Quality will out, in this case by the number of folks who are sufficiently engaged in your story after its first sentence to keep reading. Thousands of blogs float in the ether; a few capture our attention in droves.

Globalization has been empowered and propelled by the new technology – high tech has provided capacity-building tools, transformed interpersonal, international and interreligious relationships and opened up new avenues for collaboration. Interactivity has become the norm on many platforms. Comment windows come at the bottom of most web-based news and opinion articles. Both rich and poor have access, liberal and conservative, radical and reactionary, the reasoned and the ranters as well as criminals. Thus do multiple threads of communication, often interactive, weave themselves into our perception of the news, including religion and inter-religion news. Keeping up with daily change and what it means for religion is an ongoing challenge for religion journalists.

The new terrain

In short, religious and interreligious activists in this new world and the people who write about them enjoy a challenging technological banquet. Recently a colleague and I spent 90 minutes with three young women, leaders of a small group of interfaith religion journalists in northwestern India and Afghanistan. We connected via Zoom, an inexpensive web-based platform with clear video and audio feeds from each participant. Our conversation was the beginning of what should be a growing relationship, a collaborative opportunity none of us could have imagined 25 years ago. The Interfaith Observer (TIO), profiled below, has already published a story by one of their writers about the tepid global religious response to refugees today.

Local and global connections, equally easy electronically these days, create an ever-changing, constantly evolving network of relationships and new resources. The English-speaking writer about religion today can take advantage of the Pluralism Project, a pioneering electronic node of multifaith information and activity, housed at Harvard University. A journalist can get daily or weekly updates from Religion News Service and Pew Research, two of the best sources of daily religious opinion and news. Newspapers like the New York Times, Washington Post, the Guardian and Jerusalem Post are publishing engaging religious and interreligious articles. So are CNN, CBS, BBC and other international multimedia platforms. Religion Online has gathered more than 6,000 digital resources plumbing religion/religious issues, engaging articles with dependably sound scholarship. Students and journalists focused on spirituality can access thousands of resources freely available on Spirituality and Practice. The American Academy of Religion and numerous public and private universities around the world are taking interreligious issues much more seriously than a generation ago. In short, the stories are everywhere, waiting to be told, probably on multiple platforms.

For professionals, the Religion Communicators Council is a splendid group of peers that support religion journalism. The Religion Stylebook, a supplement to the Associated Press Stylebook, is a free, easy-to-use online resource, created for journalists who report on religion in the mainstream media. In the midst of all these resources and the ubiquity of publishing today, those who wish to write about religion need to look to religious institutions, which fund communication teams. Additionally, they need to be willing to define the arena you want to inhabit, the kind of stories you want to share and the discipline to know and do what you need to do to succeed, journalistically and financially.

The economic realities can be daunting. Huge cost savings accrue when you cease mailing out a paper-and-ink magazine and begin sending it electronically. But doing the hard
work of journalism still needs a budget to pay people, along with the rent and overhead and so much more in a world where generating income streams is difficult. There is a small pantheon of writers, who write magnificently regarding religion. For instance, Nicholas Kristoff at the New York Times, Sarah Pulliam Bailey at the Washington Post and Duane Elgin, who weaves science, future studies and root values into extraordinary books, are three who have the capability of attracting huge numbers of readers over a long period of time. Entering that arena takes remarkable talent, perseverance and good fortune. Religion journalists often live through penury, have day-jobs, tent ministries or fortunate circumstances and do much of the work for the love of it.

Another challenge deserves mention – the growing cultural attachment to images and diminishing writing skills. Journalists need to know what good prose is made of, but even more, we need to make words interesting, engaging, funny and poignant, evocative and precise, skills not easily mastered. Electronic translation is taking leaps and bounds. However, your personal facility with language will be the final qualifier in a business where news, however glorified with graphics, is grounded in words. The best component of my own education was the requirement during my last two years of high school to write two 500-word essays every week. What I learned was priceless.

Personal, local and networked

So, what makes a good religion journalist? An inclusive, non-judgmental point of view – knowing the right questions – a passion for your subject matter – an incessant curiosity – the gift of gab – keeping up with new tools – a mastery of language … for starters. Very few are skilled in all of this, but many, many do amazing work, sharing important religious information, opinion and story-telling, particularly if they have a good editor, a requirement that comes with the territory.

Take advantage of technological advances to develop and serve your followers. Make wise use of that most important invention, the web browser, along with multiple opportunities to train and learn more about your subject matter. Develop trustworthy relationships with people who know what you need to know to write your story, people you want to share with the world. These folks often are simpler to approach than you imagined and will enrich your work. Be courteous but not shy.

One unsettling issue writers run into with religion is differentiation, or as faith and interfaith activists have noted, the problem of preaching to the choir. Does your work change any minds? Do proponents on both or multiple sides of an issue read your work? This is not just a religious issue: It is a reality that plagues the digital universe and only recently is being looked at seriously.

Another tough issue is understanding how to respond to the cultural ground moving beneath us and the unexpected consequences. In particular, how do we deal with the diminution of language itself, where news and fake news, images and fake images intermingle, corrupting understanding and the trust between writer and reader? Rather than despairing over these realities, however, imaginative journalists will seize remarkable opportunities and go to work, even in tough circumstances.

Ruth Broyde Sharone, whose stories appear each month in The Interfaith Observer (TIO), recently wrote about Naveed Hameed, a young Christian Pakistani who grew up in a predominantly Muslim village (Sharone 2018). He suffered the slings and arrows of prejudice from his own family as well as the community and emerged as a teacher of interfaith peace.
activists, particularly young people. Naveed’s miracle? The fact that Pakistan has 140 million cellular subscribers, 67% of them young people. Moreover, that he understood and could teach the technology behind iPhone and Android devices that makes their users able to film, edit and produce videos. He raised funds and taught a team of teenagers who produced eight films about youth and women empowerment. As Naveed puts it: “It’s time to seize future technology as a means to create crucial and innovative alternative media to help shape public opinion” (Sharone 2018).

However tough the environment, we live in a wonderland of religious journalistic opportunity. We enjoy an inclusivity that was never imagined before. Everything and everyone is here; we need tags and markers to navigate the terrain. Women, young adults, LGBTQ, indigenous, non-English-speaking and neglected voices are stepping forward with excellent contributions. As the realm of pure journalism decreases, attention to communications is burgeoning and grassroots interfaith activists and organizations are paying attention. We enjoy a largely level playing field, though that is shifting as digital giants continue to increase their influence over our every moment.

An encouraging development in recent years is the felt sense of nearly everyone in religious, interreligious arenas, that we cannot do what has to be done by ourselves, in short, that we need each other in addressing a deeply troubled world. That need opens up new newsworthy arenas. More and more communities, organizations, religious traditions and individuals are taking advantage of new opportunities to work together. Their stories, their achievements and wisdom need to be shared. Such is the task of religious and religion journalists, though they are likely to be called communications specialists.

**New ways to share religious news**

The word interfaith in our globalized world is a slippery piece of language sporting various meanings. Many have bemoaned this complexity, along with the fact that a coherent, unified interfaith movement, which seemed like a possibility at the 1993 Parliament of the World’s Religions, has not emerged. Meanwhile, today most towns and cities in the world are demographically multifaith. Communities that are even more homogeneous bump into multicultural, multifaith diversity every day on their smartphones, computers and television.

Another change since 1993 is that the religion stories which now salt and pepper major media, mostly address interfaith issues and some sort of conflict. Stories that are not interfaith tend to be about intrafaith issues (those within a congregation, denomination or whole tradition). Witness the passionate, protracted struggle within the global United Methodist Church over same-sex marriage or the struggles between Sunni and Shia Muslims. Interfaith and intrafaith overlap much of the time. Years ago, when the Church of South India came close to breaking in half, United Religions Initiative (URI) leaders in India shared the social technology they use to heal and mitigate interfaith differences and conflict. The Church stayed whole.

Both of the profiles, which follow are thoroughly interfaith stories. In the first case, the focus is the development and remarkable success of URI’s evolving communications strategy. The second profile is of The Interfaith Observer (TIO), a free, monthly, independent digital publication addressing all things interfaith, circulated to more than 10,000 readers. Full disclosure: I have been closely involved in these two efforts, as the founder of TIO and, with URI, going back a quarter century.
United Religions Initiative: a brief profile

URI would never have been created without the vision and commitment of William E. Swing, Episcopal Bishop of California. In his words:

I began a long and inward journey in February 1993. During a twenty-four hour period in my life, I moved from being a person totally uninterested in interfaith matters to a person totally committed to being a catalyst for the creation of a United Religions.

(Swing 1998, 12)

In 2000 the United Religions Initiative Charter was signed, a document thousands of participants had helped define and ratify. The Purpose statement at the heart of the Charter reads:

To promote enduring, daily interfaith cooperation, to end religiously motivated violence, and to create cultures of peace, justice, and healing for the Earth and all living beings.

(United Religions Initiative n.d.)

Interfaith groups everywhere are qualified to join URI as Cooperation Circles (CCs) if they have at least seven members, represent at least three religions and embrace the URI Charter, captured succinctly in its Purpose statement. CCs do not pay dues to URI. They raise their own funds, choose their own themes, concerns and projects, are networked with each other and enjoy leadership resources and support from a global staff. At this writing URI has 985 Cooperation Circles in 108 countries, with more joining every month. It is estimated that so far 2 million people around the world benefit from these affiliated interfaith programs. A multi-million dollar endowment campaign to sustain and continue developing the network is nearly complete, and enthusiasm among URI followers is palpable.

Where does the excitement come from and how is it sustained? Developing large religiously based NGOs is a high-risk enterprise, exponentially higher for interreligious NGOs. Being able to raise significant funds and secure great leaders is critical but not enough to explain URI’s kind of growth. How have they done it? URI enjoys some natural advantages. Being in San Francisco, having a visionary who has also been gifted in fundraising, depending on an invisible body of San Francisco supporters, enjoying a committed team of local religious leaders from numerous traditions – all this was useful in forming a dynamic global organization.

Bill Swing talked about building an airplane while flying it, and URI is still very airborne. When I interviewed their current director of Global Communications and Strategic Planning on June 7, 2018, Isabelle Ortega-Lockwood, she said “At the start URI was relationship-dependent. Communication was grassroots, word-of-mouth. It was all about a bold, exciting, seemingly impossible vision.” Ramping up communications was not easy. URI’s decision-making board comes from around the world, and its early attempts at telephone conference calls are painful to remember. Some early newsletters were printed, mailed and discontinued; too little bang for the buck. Slowly, step-by-step the electronic efforts bore fruit. URI websites and digital programming became more attractive and effective. Local CCs began using communication tools never before available. The long, widely dispersed planning that preceded the Charter-signing seeded countries around the world with committed leaders, many of them gifted communicators.
“By 2000, when the URI Charter was signed, there was talk about how we were going to virtualize or digitize this community into a networked system,” continues Ortega-Lockwood. “Branding URI took place in 2010, an opportunity to set a standard for digital interfaith dialogue and action.” URI.org now is a large, integrated digital arena supplemented with regional websites in Europe, Latin America, North America and the Multiregion. The primary site is able to translate digital text into 103 languages. URI.org’s built-in database can instantly tell you, for instance, that 254 Circles of the 960 Circles in the network have identified the environment and climate change as a primary focus of their work. This environmental community within the URI community has its own communication tools. Peacemaking, leadership training, medical services, empowering women and many other categories are similarly connected. Moreover, of course, URI Facebook pages abound.

These robust communications systems still cannot account for the fact that in a typical month 15 or 20 interfaith groups from around the world ask to join the network. Welcomes are made, relationships begun and the stories multiply. Remarkably, the secret sauce comes from social technology, rather than digital technology, and represents a huge shift in religion/religious storytelling, journalism and communications, however you characterize it.

Early in URI’s development, David Cooperrider, the founder of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and a global pioneer in organizational development, read about a prospective United Religions in a brief item in the Cleveland Plain Dealer, a distinguished Ohio newspaper. Cooperrider contacted San Francisco saying his work focused on getting conflicted communities with shared values to work together happily. Within a few short weeks, a partnership joined URI and Cooperrider’s team of doctoral candidates, along with his colleague Diana Whitney. The task they shared – to design and engender the kind of global interfaith entity its founders envisioned.

Appreciative Inquiry sets problem solving on the shelf and essentially focuses on what a group most desires. It approaches a community’s highest aspirations with the same rigor and discipline that problem solvers bring to their solutions and it naturally develops participant enthusiasm in the process. Instead of fixing what is wrong, it seeks to create what is right, right in the eyes of the participants (for an extended discussion on Appreciative Inquiry and worshipping communities, see Chaffee 2005).

AI sessions, long or short, typically start with one-on-one conversations utilizing questions that participants appreciate exploring. For example, Could you tell me something about your religious tradition that you find particularly meaningful and important? Back in a circle of eight an hour or two later, you tell each other’s stories. By the end of the morning, you know quite a bit about everyone in the circle. Meanwhile, everyone in the room has become a storyteller, a communicator being taken seriously about things he or she cares about. That personal sense of engagement is embedded in the URI Charter’s 21 principles. The freedom to be self-directing includes giving affiliates the freedom to organize, program and raise funds without permission from headquarters, an unheard-of freedom in most nonprofits, NGOs and religious communities.

To the point here, empowered by digital technology, social technology has left its footprint on the quality and quantity of URI communications. Several factors helped this happen, starting with how the organization describes itself:

URI is “a global grassroots interfaith network that cultivates peace and justice by engaging people to bridge religious and cultural differences and work together for the good of their communities and the world” (United Religions Initiative n.d.). In a deeply conflicted world, this is a beacon of hope for many seeking ways to serve.
• From the start, everyone is respected and heard in this network, a frequent organizational promise that is rarely met in most institutions. At URI the notion extends throughout the establishment, including the expectation that everyone in the network is welcome to take on particular activities they volunteer for, rather than being assigned. Participants explore where their enthusiasm is centered and are encouraged to get engaged at that level.
• The self-interest of each affiliated Cooperation Circle and its particular goals is also recognized and respected by the network, with freedoms rarely granted to affiliates in most hierarchical organizations.
• The network has no fees. Your group is expected to pay its own bills. Leadership training and networking provided by the hub improves local philanthropic possibilities for everyone.
• The Charter encourages hospitality, gender equity, institutional learning and evolving as an organization.

In terms of interreligious journalism, for years URI has promoted stories from its Circles more than itself. As a result, a grassroots media feast has been set, particularly in Africa and South Asia. Now, though, Isabelle Ortega-Lockwood says, more attention will be paid to introducing URI as a global interfaith stakeholder, exploring what the network itself is all about, what it offers and how it operates.

If by religion journalism we mean being supported for covering interfaith and intrafaith news, we are talking about a relatively few authors enjoying a rarified environment where the competition is fierce. However, if we talk about modern communications technology and all the opportunities it provides, the arena is wide-open and, if you are good, you will be in demand. Sharing religion news, circulating opinion, comparing spiritual practices and providing resources like event calendars is all as important as ever before.

Last May, URI’s Multiregion (a grouping of Circles, which address international constituencies) held a two-hour Zoom session. Eighty-eight participants from 60 Cooperation Circles in 19 countries participated in a two-hour video summit. Each Circle took up to two minutes to tell their story to the rest. Not too much detail in such brief introductions, not much more than the newspaper article that captured David Cooperrider’s attention a quarter century earlier. The summit was a strong beginning, creating a new sense of solidarity and connection among like-minded interfaith activists around the world, most not having met before.

URI is a remarkable example of what is possible in this new world where both digital and social technologies are reshaping what it means to share the news and get to know what we need to know.

The Interfaith Observer (TIO): a brief profile

The decision to found The Interfaith Observer (TIO) came while shrugging off the weariness of more than 30 years in grassroots interfaith program administration and pastoral responsibilities. As retirement approached, free time emerged like a sunrise to read and read more, a rare pleasure for executive directors. Years spent on interfaith programming had kept me relatively ignorant about my specialty, interfaith relations. So for months I immersed myself in interfaith content on the Internet.

Two observations surfaced and changed my life. First, without any central direction, without databases or lists or shared agendas, interfaith activity was spontaneously showing up all over the world — in rural Arizona as well as Chicago, in Antarctica as well as India.
A massive cultural shift, empowered by technology and globalization, was and is happening all around us.

Second, I noticed how little attention was being paid to this global religious shift. Ten years after 9/11, major media was mostly bypassing interreligious, multifaith news and opinion. A library of fascinating stories were not being told.

In 1999, Beliefnet was an early adapter in posting digital multi-religious content. Patheos followed in 2008. These two high-volume digital platforms have given voice to dozens of traditions that had next to no national/international attention. However, neither Beliefnet nor Patheos has a driving vision, either religious or journalistic, except to grow big. Neither has much news coverage, though they have featured some extraordinary contributors. They are equal opportunity sites, not a venue for interfaith dialogue, much less action. An interreligious-communications-as-a-business model left them prey to those who buy and sell digital platforms. The machinations of corporate ownership have made them more conservative. Today both are owned by BN Media, LLC, a corporate conglomerate associated with, among others, the National Rifle Association, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and Focus on the Family (Halsted 2018).

Meanwhile, information and resources keep multiplying. Leonard Swidler, champion of the Global Ethic and promoter of the Golden Rule, started the Journal of Ecumenical Studies with his wife Arlene Swidler in 1964. According to its website, it was “the first peer-reviewed journal in the field of interreligious dialogue,” a distinguished publication that is still publishing. The Pluralism Project was initiated by Diana Eck at Harvard in 1991 and continues to be one of the most vibrant, informative interfaith sites on the Internet. The Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs was founded in 2006 at Georgetown University and offers an ongoing flow of programming and publication that enriches interfaith relations around the world.

These organizations, though, pay more attention to their programs than to current events and this month’s news. They offer enriching content but not today’s headlines. An exception is the Pluralism Project’s Religion Diversity News, an excellent aggregator of headlines and links to significant news about religion from around the world. Religion News Service fills what would otherwise be a vacuum with a staff of reporters, columnists and aggregators posting religious stories five days a week. Furthermore, the Pew Research Center publishes a list of important religion stories throughout the week, garnish for the major reports they regularly publish about religion in the world. Mainstream media, though, has little use for religion except covering dramatic interfaith conflict and even then, stories are at the mercy of a brief window of exposure before disappearing from sight.

Looking at this state of affairs, I wondered What next? Over a series of extended conversations, a plan emerged: the notion of a monthly magazine or journal that published or republished 10 or 15 articles about a particular theme drawn from the multitude of interfaith issues worth pursuing. It would also aggregate inter/intrafaith content from around the world, with links to 15–20 news stories that readers may not have seen. All would be written for the general reader.

That was the vision an interfaith advisory board cooked up in early 2011, knowing that it would have to be done with an unusual business plan. A name was chosen: The Interfaith Observer (TIO). A nearby, like-minded nonprofit, the Interfaith Peace Project, signed on to be fiscal agent, thereby empowering fundraising efforts. TIO became a Cooperation Circle in URI’s Multiregion group, which provided an immediate open-ended international network. Anna Arphan, who had done web design for the Nevada Interfaith Council, became TIO’s first webmaster and, in close dialogue with a team of about a dozen, created the TIO logo.
TIO’s first issue was posted on the Internet on 15 September 2011 to 305 addresses. Today it is posted to more than 10,000 addresses and growing. It goes largely to faith and interfaith leaders and activists and to students. In seven years, 77 issues have been posted for free and are available on TIO’s website, which archives the articles by subject. Megan Anderson was a junior in college when she asked to contribute an article. She went on to become an intern, then webmaster (where she designed and formatted a new digital platform and archive), social media director and now serves as associate editor and webmaster. Numerous interns have helped the cause, but her participation has made everything about TIO better.

August is a vacation month, which pegs us at 11 issues a year. In major media, of course, TIO is not even a blip. It is, however, a first step taken by people who want to see a diversity of stories of faith and practice, as well as the challenges raised by the Global Ethic, shared among us all for the sake of us all. In short, the journal was created as a counter-cultural experiment in communications: All the contributions have come freely from more than 400 writers representing several dozen traditions, ranging from teenagers to seniors, including clerics, distinguished academics and practitioners, professionals and volunteers, along with numerous artists. For its first four years, TIO’s monthly expenditures were under a thousand dollars, a figure, which eventually doubled when we created a new website and began providing some minimal financial support editorially. Otherwise, we paid a bit of rent, paid our Internet service vendors and little else.

Being first with a story is not a TIO priority – getting the word out as widely as possible is the goal. We republish numerous stories and encourage others to republish TIO stories. In terms of interfaith journalism, we believe redundancy is a gift, not a pitfall. We spent our time and energy on the quality of the content rather than marketing and building distribution, assuming that if TIO was worth keeping, there are those who would step forward to provide the institutional superstructure needed for sustainability. That seems to have happened, as noted below.

A particular element of TIO’s development needs special attention. From the start, the founders had a shared vision and set of goals that has been recorded and occasionally revised. Here is the statement as it stands today:

**Core values and goals of The Interfaith Observer (TIO)**

TIO is an independent publication, affiliated with many faith and interfaith groups, and managed by the Tri-Faith Initiative in Omaha, Nebraska. The editor and associate editor oversee publishing decisions and are aided by a diverse advisory committee. The values and goals below, which are periodically updated, are not presented as static abstractions but are actualized in how TIO delivers its services.

- Promote diversity, inclusivity, and respectful relationships within and among religious and spiritual traditions.
- Fairly report religious and interreligious news, particularly stories that are ignored by major media.
- Address interfaith history, issues, goals, education, and religious literacy, explore and highlight interdisciplinary issues relevant to advancing interfaith cooperation and provide an enduring record of the emerging interfaith movement in its various forms and expressions, including photography and video.
- Promote interfaith dialogue; transform strangers into friends; respect the other; engender trust.
• Address and sometimes support interfaith activities around issues such as climate change, religious bigotry, immigration policy and marginalized people – all for the sake of en-gendering a vital, healthy, just interfaith global culture.

• Report news and activities of the world’s major interfaith stakeholders along with covering the most important national, regional and local interfaith activities everywhere and foster networking and communication amongst actors in the interfaith movement except where it impinges on the rights of others.

• Publish stories from 500 to 3,000 words for the general reader, with appropriate links for those who want to dig deeper.

• Explore how interfaith cooperation contributes meaningfully to interdisciplinary and intersectional efforts.

From this has flowed more than 1,500 stories for the general reader about every interfaith-related subject, we could imagine and the list is hardly exhausted. Along with the website and monthly postings, TIO is active on Facebook and Twitter.

TIO is a modest experiment in promoting faith and interfaith news and stories with people around the world who have shared values and hopes and want to do something about it. It is full of what journalism began with – the concept of news, information that you feel you need to know. It is not clear how TIO relates to the rest of media in the world, except as one experiment among many.

The dream that an organization would adopt TIO, allow it to keep its editorial freedom and assume the responsibilities of ownership, has come true. Therefore, we were delighted to announce that Tri-Faith Initiative (TFI) of Omaha, Nebraska stepped forward to assume the ownership responsibilities for The Interfaith Observer as of 1 August 2018, when we signed papers.

TFI developed in 2005 as the expression of three Abrahamic congregations – Jewish, Christian and Muslim – who are now completing and sharing a new 38-acre, $65+ million campus. While holding to its core three-faith focus, TFI is committed to becoming a major interfaith stakeholder, like TIO, engaging people of all religious and spiritual traditions, as well of those who ascribe to none. TIO will maintain its editorial independence as a project of an institution, which shares TIO's vision and goals. Will it survive and thrive in the boiling pot of global religion and journalism? Not a good question. Are there people, local and global interfaith leaders who share the vision and are dedicating their time, talents and treasure to the cause? Absolutely. You will read about it!

Conclusion

More than once in the modern era it has been suggested that God is dead, that religion is over and will fade away – it just never happened. Twentieth century Russia and China both failed spectacularly in banishing religion. Meanwhile, for good and for bad, it is clearly as important to human civilization as ever. In most countries it is not monolithic, which is good. Both within and between traditions we find conflict, though tools and resources are being created to mitigate conflict. More and more are realizing that stoking conflict harms us all and that the time has arrived to shelve our differences and work together for the sake of everyone and the earth.

Every step of this journey is rife with informative, empowering stories, exemplars to profile, important opinion and news of the day. We need storytellers. I have tried to be clear about the difficulties you face as a religious/religion journalist in our helter-skelter culture.
For those with the energy and gumption, though, it can be a spectacular vocation where you can make a difference sharing the news.

Further readings


Though a modest venture surrounded by media giants, RNS is the best religion news site in English.


As noted above, TIO is a monthly digital journal dedicated to interfaith story-telling and religion and interfaith news.


This a large portal for all sorts of faith and interfaith information and news.


URI is an excellent source of stories and news regarding nearly a thousand interfaith groups in 107 countries.

References


