

Media Communication

News Agency Website Agenda on Religion. Comparative Analysis on Mediafax.ro and Agerpres.ro

Aurelia Ana Vasile¹

Abstract: According to the “Global Index of Religiosity and Atheism” (WIN-Gallup International, 27 July 2012, retrieved 24 August 2012), which was a global 2012 poll, the reports label 59% of the world's population as “religious” and 36% as not religious, including 13% who are atheists, with a 9% decrease in religious belief from 2005. Thereto, religion is an important issue of inherent influence in the media nowadays. Despite the ongoing secularization process that we are facing these days, humans still feel the need to refer to religion within their attempt to construct one's own outlook on life, and to make some sense out of existence in general (Max Weber, 1920)². A comparative content analysis on Mediafax.ro and Agerpres.ro, performed for an almost nine-and-a-half-month time span (1st January to 13th October 2015), showed interesting facts on how press agency journalists relate to religion as a media topic, both in terms of quality (key words and key topics) and in terms of quantity. A comparison between the Orthodox religion of the majority of the Romanians, and other denominations, also accounted for intriguing research findings.

Keywords: press agency journalists; Orthodox religion; religion

Motto: *“The terrorist events of Tuesday morning, September 11, 2001, and their aftermath renewed our awareness that religion matters in contemporary times.”*

Dillon, M. (2003, p. 3)

Emile Durkheim defined religion as a “unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things”. Due to its historical background, Romania displays an overwhelming majority of Christian own citizens. Eastern Orthodoxy is the largest

¹ Associate Professor, PhD, College of Journalism and Communication Studies, University of Bucharest, Romania, Address: 36-46 Mihail Kogalniceanu Blvd, Bucharest 050107, Sector 5, Romania, Tel.: +40-21-307 73 00, Fax: +40-21-313 17 60, Corresponding author: aurelia-ana.vasile@fjsc.ro.

² In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus), (1920), 2013, Routledge.

religious denomination in Romania, numbering 16,307,004, according to the 2011 census, or 81.04% of the population. Therefore, at first glance, religion seems an important issue for Romanians. However, the rate of church attendance is significantly lower. This may be quite telling about other type of phenomena regarding the core values within the outlook on the world of Romanian citizens.

According to the “Global Index of Religiosity and Atheism” (WIN-Gallup International, 27 July 2012, retrieved 24 August 2012)ⁱ, which was a global 2012 poll, the reports label 59% of the world's population as "religious" and 36% as not religious, including 13% who are atheists, with a 9% decrease in religious belief from 2005. Thereto, religion is an important issue of inherent influence in the media nowadays. Despite the ongoing secularization process that we are facing these days, humans still feel the need to refer to religion within their attempt to construct one's own outlook on life, and to make some sense out of existence in general (Max Weber, 1920)¹.

World statistics (Global Index of Religion and Atheism, 2010) show that Romania is ranked as the fourth Christian country (in terms of density of Christians of 99%), after Vatican (100%), Pitcairn Islands (100% Seventh-day Adventists), and Samoa (99%, like Romania). Actually, this means that Romania houses the second biggest percentage of Christians in the world.

Such an interesting fact justifies any attempt to see what kind of media coverage religion elicits by Romanian press agencies.

If Romanians care so much about religion, then this issue should be obvious in the news at the news agencies, as well.

News agencies are organizations that gather news reports and sell them on to newspapers and magazines, to radio and TV stations. As they get the fresh, first-hand items of information, and aim at providing such information for news outlets that then refer to the target ordinary people publics, news agencies need to be skilled in handling a positive relationship with these news outlets, and to keep a fair, balanced, seriously source-related news content, to be fast in mirroring the world, so as to be worth being contacted to sell news.

Jonathan Fenby, who worked for Reuters, and then for The Guardian, The Independent, and The Observer, reminded the fact that, in order to reach wide

¹ In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus), (1920), 2013, Routledge.

acceptability, news agencies, need to “avoid overt partiality”. “Demonstrably correct information is their stock in trade”. Being neutral, avoiding ambiguity or doubt, all these are key to effectiveness in news agency activity.

Therefore, we deem that an investigation on news agency content may be quite interesting as to what religion looks like in the news, at the very core of the media information management process.

The best known Romanian news agency which changed after the former political regime, is Agerpres. Another best known agency is Mediafax. At a check of the best known Romanian news agencies on Google, these two, Agerpres and Mediafax, jut out (as “agenții de presă naționale”). Agerpres is known abroad as *Agenția Română de Presă (the Romanian News Agency)*.

A comparative content analysis on Mediafax.ro and Agerpres.ro, performed for an almost nine-and-a-half-month time span (1st January to 13th October 2015), showed interesting facts on how press agency journalists relate to religion as a media topic, both in terms of quality (key words and key topics) and in terms of quantity. A comparison between the Orthodox religion of the majority of the Romanians, and other denominations, also accounted for intriguing research findings.

Context

Steve Bruce (2002, pp. 45-59) noted that the peoples of pre-industrial Europe were “deeply religious”. Along with industrialization, “the once-pervasive religious worldview gave way to an increasingly secular public culture (...) Whether we count membership, church attendance, religious ceremonies to mark rights of passage, or indices of belief, we find that across the industrial world there has been a major decline in all religious indices”.

Besides secularization, religious beliefs, mostly Christianity, faced diversity created by migrating multitudes, which brought about schism and sect formation.

Also, as Inglehart (1990, 1997)¹ emphasized, increasing affluence may reduce “religious fervor and traditionalism”, and wealth may then be(come) another cornerstone of secularization.

¹ In Bruce, Steve, *Secularization*, in (Turner, 2010, pp. 125-141)

The framework of globalism, and that of the onset background of the emergence of scientific explanations of the origin of the world, also account for secularization nowadays, as it seems.

Within this world context, seemingly on the contrary Romania displays an even keener propensity towards religious faith, ranking fourth in the world in 2010 among the countries with the greatest proportion of Christians, with an overwhelming 99% percent of the population who were self-declared Christians by belief.

One intriguing fact regarding this strong propensity of Romanian towards Christian religious belief is that, for almost fifty years, throughout the Communist regime, religious belief was punished, and people refrained from showing signs of religious belief, for fear of official social reprimand. Such resistance to strong constraint or restraining of freedom of thought or of manifestations of consciousness, is really compellingly surprising.

Another strange proof of resistance to the atheism impelled over Romanians during the Communist period, is that of distance to the official church. Thus, though people distrusted the *newly appointed* priests who were hired by the Communists to replace the *real/authentic* former Orthodox priests, which made people then want to keep the distance from the actual buildings of the official church and from the less authentic clergy, people still kept some basic trust in the power of God.

Under the siege of an atheist kind of dictatorship, it is a matter of wonder that Romanians kept some sort of fundamental religious Christian belief.

Contrary to what common sense may suggest, that people lose faith when their life is not rewarding, and gain faith and gratefulness when they live in times of plenty, quite the opposite actually happens. Suffering brings people closer and on good terms with God, whereas in abundance people forget to be grateful and to look up to the source of their blessings. This could be a way to explain the phenomenon in Romania. As people feel weak when facing everyday life challenges, they turn to the divinity for relief and for support, according to Inglehart (1990, 1997), as well.

Though, under Communist atheist dictatorship, Romanians have lost track of many religious assets and accomplishments, a basic sense of the "sacred", seems to have been preserved, no matter what. Such a conservation of the sacred inside the

Romanian population, may support Emile Durkheim's collective effervescence, a "phenomenon out of which solidarity experienced as the sacred is able to emerge".¹

This intriguing fact about Romanians and their allegiance to Christian religion, seems to stand for the concept of "post-secular society", a term coined following the work of Jurgen Habermas (2006) on rationality and religion in contemporary society. Turner (2010, p. 651), distinguishes between *political secularization* and *social secularization*. The political side of secularization refers to formal issues, to institutions, to the historical separation of church and state, whereas the social side of secularization mainly regards culture, values, attitudes, informal and customary issues.

This dichotomy representation of secularization better explains the Romanian paradox of claimed religious Christian belief of the population in spite of half a century of atheist regime. Some sort of shallow concept of religion as coming to terms with the Creator, in order to avoid being "punished by the heavens", may also account for the tiptop percentage of claimed Christian Romanians. Bryan S. Turner (2010, p. 661) mentions a growing division between "*religion*" and "*spirituality*" (Hunt, 2005). This division appears also in the case of this Romanian 99% of the population declared Christian.

Research Aim and Objectives

News agencies are the source of much of the information that other news outlets disseminate. They are at the core of news writing.

As Romanian ranks fourth in the world in terms of the proportion of Christians in the population, with an overwhelming percentage of 99% (actually, the second percentage/rate in the world), according to what Romanians declared about themselves in statistics, religion in the media is an important issue in Romania.

Within the context of migration of populations of religious fundamentalist Muslims towards European countries, and of conflicts generated by the secularized manifestations of the media throughout the world (like the conflict brought about by the cartoons of Mohammed in Jyllands Posten in Denmark, or by the Charlie Hebdo in France), religion is becoming a more and more important issue for the media nowadays. The issue of the values of the sacred versus the secular in the media

¹ Mellor, Philip A. and Shilling, Chris, 2010, *The Religious Habitus: Embodiment, Religion, and Sociological Theory*, in (Turner, 2010, pp. 201-221).

should be tackled seriously, and with care, at least in order to avoid undesired social conflict. If international relations professionals take into account such issues of religion, basic principles of communication should deal with that, as well.

Therefore, our main aims in research regard the way two important Romanian news agencies present religion as a topic in the news, throughout a period of almost nine months and a half, from January the 1st, to October the 13th 2015, and to check the number of news and feature stories about the main religion in Romania, i.e., Orthodox, as compared to other denominations, and what kind of approach to religion is adopted (secularized or not).

Hypotheses

We assumed that the more people belong to a certain denomination in a country (e.g., Romania), the more that denomination appears in the topics of the news and feature stories by the most important news agency websites (quantitatively).

Then, the more people belong to a certain denomination, the more biased "for" that denomination the content of the news and feature stories by the most important news agency websites (qualitatively).

Research Corpus

To select the best rated Romanian news agencies at this time, we checked with the website for national news agencies, <http://www.stiri.com.ro/agentii-de-presa-nationale/>.

According to this website, Agerpres is well known as the National News Agency of Romania (as of from before 1989), and Mediafax is also the best known other agency. Other well-known Romanian agencies are Newsin, and Rador. However, the most important ones are Agerpres and Mediafax.

Consequently, we searched the content of news and feature stories from two news agency websites, that of Agerpres and that of Mediafax, for the time interval from January the 1st, to October the 13th 2015.

Methodological Approach

To refer to our research aim, objectives, hypotheses, and corpus we resorted to content analysis, according to the criteria of religious topics, denomination topics in the content of news agency news and feature stories.

Content analysis is a method widely used in order to study various aspects of culture and cultural artifacts like newspapers and magazines, TV and radio programs, discourse (speeches), literature, music, etc. Media content is cultural content, and therefore it lends itself well to such analysis.

In 2006 Agabrian (p. 20) noted that content analysis is a technique of collecting and analyzing text (content) as meaning, imagery, symbols, ideas, topics or any other type of messages used in communicating. Content analysis may be approached either/both quantitatively or/and qualitatively. It provides meaningful information regarding its study objects, that is, newspaper content, for instance, in our analysis performed on the content of news and feature stories from two news agency websites, Agerpres and Mediafax.

From Kimberly Neuendorf's viewpoint, (2002, p. 10) "content analysis is a summarizing, quantitative analysis of messages that relies on the scientific method (including reliability, validity, generalizability, replicability, and hypothesis testing) and is not limited as to the types of variables that may be measured or the context in which the messages are created or presented."

Quantitatively, the research categories/variables that we related to were: total number of topics related to religion, number of topics regarding the religion of the Romanian majority: Orthodox, number of topics regarding the Muslims, the Catholic, other religion topics.

Qualitatively, we were interested in assessing the biased versus fair/not-biased approach to religion on both news agency websites.

Harold Lasswell formulated the most important six questions of content analysis: "Who (1) says what (2), to whom (3), why (4), to what extent (5) and with what effect (6)?"

Our research sketch of answers to these questions would be: The two most important news agency websites (1) in Romania at this time present religious issues/topics (2) to its publics (3) to provide reliable source information (4) referring to all denominations (5) with the desired effect of both getting profit, and providing basic information on religious issues.

Our hypotheses take into account both quantitative and qualitative criteria, in order to achieve some kind of understanding of the representation of religion in the media, mostly in the content of news agency stories/topics.

Research Results

The research results that we came up to, when testing our hypotheses, showed a few intriguing facts.

The two hypotheses we referred to, were as follows.

Firstly, we assumed that the more people belong to a certain denomination in a country (e.g. Romania, Orthodoxy), the more that denomination appears in the topics of the news and feature stories by the most important news agency websites (quantitatively).

Second, our assumption went as the more people belong to a certain denomination, the more biased “for” that denomination the content of the news and feature stories by the most important news agency websites (qualitatively).

Analyzing the content on the *Agerpres* website, from January the 1st to October the 13th 2015, out of 376 news and feature stories on religious issues, 105, that is, 27.92% referred to Orthodox Christianity, which was less than the 123 stories on Islam, corresponding to 32.71% of all stories on religion. 60 stories were on Catholicism (15.96%), and 15 (3.98%) were on antisemitism. 16 stories, that is, 4.25%, were on general religion issues, with no specific emphasis on a certain denomination, mostly regarding religious education in schools. The hypothesis on representation of the denomination of the majority in the majority of the stories was discarded by the research data collected, as the number of stories on Islam outran the number of stories regarding Christian Orthodoxy.

A qualitative approach may provide meaningful explanation regarding these results. The events that brought about such a ranking of topics in the news mainly regarded the Charlie Hebdo terrorist avenging attacks in the aftermath of the publication of satirical cartoons that were irreverent of the Muslim religious belief. Other such topics referred to the tragedy of the crowd accident in Mecca, in October 2015. These topics elicited significant reference on news agency websites worldwide.

As it appears obvious, newsworthiness issues came first in the choice of topics of interest on religion. Nevertheless, Orthodoxy obtained a top second ranking that mirrors its importance in the statistics regarding the religious belief of Romanians.

On the *Mediafax* website, out of the total 95 stories on religion, from January the 1st to October the 13th 2015, also, the topics on Islam/Muslims came first, with a total of 20, corresponding to a percentage of 21.05. Orthodoxy comes second, with 15 topics, which is 15.79%. Catholicism comes third, with 10 topics, that is, 10.52%. General topics on religion, appeared in 50 stories, which is 52.63%, out of which, 39 regarded religious education in schools, that is, 41.05%.

The table below comparatively shows these quantitative data collected for the two news agency websites.

Table 1. Percentage of News and Feature Stories on Religious Topics from January, the 1st to October, the 13th, 2015 on News Agency Websites *Agerpres* and *Mediafax*

News Agency Website	On Orthodoxy	On Islam	On Catholicism	General Topics on Religion
<i>Agerpres</i>	27.92%	32.71%	15.96%	4.25%
<i>Mediafax</i>	15.79%	21.05%	10.52%	52.63% (41.05% on religious education in schools)

Another interesting fact, for *Agerpres*, is that all Orthodox religious holidays/celebrations were presented on the news agency website, besides the significant percentage (27.92%) of stories on Orthodox religion topics.

Interpretation of Data

Motto: “*Habermas* thinks that the prominence of religion today is an effect of missionary work, religious competition and fundamentalism. But these accounts leave out other developments such as the globalization of piety, the commodification of religion, and the emergence of what sociologists refer to as spirituality.” Bryan S. Turner (2010, p. 660)

Our research findings have shown that on the two news agency websites, no obvious bias was identifiable, except for the presentation of all Orthodox religious holidays on Agerpres.

Quantitatively, the occurrence of a denomination in the topics on these news agency websites did not correspond to the number of people from the overall Romanian population belonging to the denomination of the majority (that is, Orthodox). Actually, this occurrence of denomination topics depended on the occurrence of newsworthy events regarding religion. Thus, though the number of Muslims in Romania is only 64,000 (less than 1%), as compared to the Orthodox Christian majority of 81.04%, according to the 2011 census, the percentage of topics on Islam was more important than that on Orthodoxy on both websites. That happened because of two important events, and other entailing processes. These two events regarding Islam were the terrorist attack at Charlie Hebdo, in France, and the crowd accident at the Mecca pilgrimage. Many news stories referred to these events.

Qualitatively, there was no Christian Orthodox bias (the religion of the overwhelming majority of Romanians) identifiable in the content of the stories on these two news agency websites.

As an important conclusion to our findings, we may notice that religion when “filtered” through journalism, or through its being conveyed in the news by the news agencies is *commodified, secularized*. It becomes a news (journalism) product that is sold.

What Kitiarsa (2010, p. 565) in (Turner, 2010, pp. 563-583) meant by religious commodification, an intriguing trend identified by the sociology of religion nowadays, has to do with consumption, marketing, and goods. Pattana Kitiarsa referred to commodification of religion as “an emerging multifaceted and multidimensional marketized (sic!) process which turns a religious faith or tradition into consumable and marketable goods. It is an interactive and iterative relationship between religion and market, simultaneously involving both market force commodifying religion, and religious institution taking part in marketplace and consuming culture”.

Regular dictionaries of the English language define the term *commodification* as “commercialization of an activity that is not commercial by nature” (Oxford Dictionary of English, 1989, p. 563).

Ever since the 1960s, there has been identified another process that affects religion, a process coined as the changing nature of religion (Wood, 2010 in Turner, 2010, pp. 267-285). What at first glance may have seemed a *decline* in public (not private) manifestations of religion, was reconsidered as being a process of *reshaping* of religion. Besides commodification, one such reshaping trend may be considered that of spirituality replacing religiosity. This may explain pretty much of the immense percentage (99%) of Romanians who declared their Christian religious belief, though many Romanians do not act as religious people, quite often. This trend appears in the way religion is approached in journalism (on the two news agency websites, as well), secularized, without Orthodox majority bias. The journalists themselves seem to be passing from religiosity to spirituality in their private life, or to secularization within their religious sense of belongingness, as we have intuitively noticed in off the record interviewing, to try to make some sense out of facts and events.

To conclude, we may infer here that religion becomes a mere topic, part of a media product in journalism, on news agency websites, as well. This phenomenon works also in countries like Romania, where statistics data show that the overwhelming majority of the population (99%) claim being Christians, having religious faith, then.

References

- Brinkerhoff, David B.; White, Lynn K. (1988). *Sociology*. New York: West Publishing Company.
- Croteau, David; Hoynes, William. (2014). *Media/Society. Industries, Images and Audiences*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.
- Dillon, M. (ed.) (2003). *Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fukuyama, Francis (1995). *Trust: Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*. New York: Free Press.
- Gavreliuc, Alin (2011). *Psihologie interculturală. Repere teoretice și diagnoze românești/Intercultural psychology. Theoretical and Romanian diagnosis*. Iasi: Editura Polirom.
- Herskovits, M.J. (1948). *Man and His Works: The Science of Cultural Anthropology*. New York: Knopf.
- Hodkinson, Paul (2011). *Media, Culture and Society. An Introduction*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.
- Iluț, Petre (2009). *Psihologie socială și sociopsihologie/Social psychology and socio-psychological*. Iasi: Polirom.
- O'Sullivan, Tim; Dutton, Brian & Rayner, Philip (1998). *Studying the Media*. London: Arnold, Hodder Headline Group.

- Ritzer, George (2008). *Sociological Theory*. New York: McGraw Hill Higher Education.
- Saler, Benson (1993). *Conceptualizing Religion*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Skeat, Walter W. (1993). *The Concise Dictionary of English Etymology*. Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd.
- Taylor, Anita; Rosegrant, Teresa; Meyer, Arthur & Samples, Thomas B. (1986). *Communicating*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc.
- Tunstall, J. (1983). *The Media in Britain*. London: Constable, In O'Sullivan, Tim; Dutton, Brian; Rayner, Philip (1998). *Studying the Media*. London: Arnold, Hodder Headline Group.
- Turner, Bryan S. (ed.). (2010). *The New Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Religion*. Chichester, West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- VanArragon, Raymond J. (2010). *Key Terms in Philosophy of Religion*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Vlăsceanu, Lazăr (coord.). (2011). *Sociologie/Sociology*. Iasi: Polirom.
- West, Richard; Turner, Lynn H. (2000). *Introducing Communication Theory*. Mountain View: Mayfield Publishing Company.
- Wilkinson, Michael B., Campbell, Hugh N. (2010). *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction*. New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group.

Countries with the greatest proportion of Christians from Christianity by country (as of 2010)

-  Vatican City 100%;
-  Pitcairn Islands 100% (100% Seventh-day Adventist);
-  Samoa ~99%;
-  Romania 99%;
-  American Samoa 98.3%;
-  Malta 98.1% (mostly Roman Catholic);
-  Venezuela 98% (96% Roman Catholic);

-  Greece 98% (95% Greek Orthodox);
-  Marshall Islands 97.2%;
-  Tonga 97.2%;
-  San Marino 97% (~97% Roman Catholic);
-  Paraguay 96.9% (mostly Roman Catholic);
-  Peru 96.5% (mostly Roman Catholic);
-  El Salvador 96.4%;
-  Kiribati 96%;
-  Federated States of Micronesia ~96%;
-  Barbados 95.1%;
-  Papua New Guinea 94.8%;
-  East Timor 94.2%;
-  Armenia 93.5% (mostly Armenian Apostolic).