

Title

Media portrayals of religion and the secular sacred: A longitudinal study of British newspaper and television representations and their reception

What this Study Contributes

This project analyses current portrayals of popular religion and the secular sacred in a selection of British newspapers and terrestrial TV channels in order (a) to examine the ways in which the media currently represent religious issues, beliefs and practices, and (b) to uncover and interpret the values and interests inherent in these representations and the voices that constitute them.

Replicating the research design and methods employed in a research project undertaken in the 1980s at the University of Leeds, the new project will enable a comparative analysis of two datasets and for changes in the representation of religion and its reception to be interpreted in light of theoretical debates about secularization, resacralization and the changing relationship of religion and secularity.

Team

Principal Investigator: Prof Kim Knott (Leeds)

Co-Investigator: Dr Elizabeth Poole (Staffs)

Research Assistant: Dr Teemu Taira (Leeds)

University

University of Leeds

Award

Phase 1 Large Grant £219,328

Research Partners

Dr Robert Towler, consultant, ex-Head of Research, Independent Television Corporation and Director of 1982-83 project of which this is a re-study.

British Universities Film and Video Council

Annikka Mutanen, Finnish journalist and Reuters Fellow 2008-09

Approach

As before, a *quantitative and qualitative content analysis* is being conducted of the same newspapers taken over an equivalent two-month period (*The Sun*, *The Times* and the *Yorkshire Evening Post*), and terrestrial television recorded over seven days (*BBC1*, *BBC2*, *ITV*), with limited comparative sampling to reflect the current array of popular outputs (e.g. *The Guardian*, *Daily Mail*, *Ch4*, *SKY News*). *Key themes* discussed in 1982-83 will be compared, and new themes identified and analysed.

The coding frame and keywords developed in the previous study as part of the quantitative content analysis have been adopted and further developed to reflect contemporary portrayals and representations.

In the second year a *short reception study* will be conducted by means of six *focus groups*, and findings from this study will be considered in relation to data from the content analysis. Involving audiences in this study of the meanings and understanding of religion will enable us to discover how far they share the discourse of the media, as well as revealing some of the socio-cultural factors important in the decoding of mediated information.

As in 1982-3, media treatment of a *key religious event or controversy will be analysed* (in 1982 it was the papal visit, this time the Geert Wilders case/fitna) with reference to a variety of media outputs, including SKY and cable channels, internet news media and web blogs.

In the final phase in year two, using the two datasets, a *comparative analysis* will be conducted, with particular reference to theoretical debates about the re-emergence of religion and its relationship to the secular.

Findings

Project finishes **31st August 2010**.

Activities and Outcomes

The project has co-organised the conference 'Social Media and the Sacred' in Camden 28-29th June 2010 with the [Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change](#) at the Open University, University of Manchester and other partner institutions.

Kim Knott 2008 'The Age of Enlightenment: God, sacred cows and the media', *The Reporter* (University of Leeds' staff magazine), issue 535, July.

Teemu Tira 2009 'Religion of the market economy' ['Markkinatalouden uskonto'], *AVEK: Journal of the Promotion Centre of Audiovisual Culture*, no 1, pp 22-25.

Further Information

Podcasts

Kim Knott was interviewed by Norman Winter about the project. Listen to the complete podcast [here](#) or...

- Kim Knott summarising the scope of her team's research [here](#)
- her reflection on the significance of the study in a short extract [here](#)
- this [short extract](#) in which Kim gives an insight into findings emerging from the study
- Kim assessing the value of the project to the academic world and to those working in television and newspapers [here](#).