

Media coverage of religion is up, even though traditional religious practice is down



Pope Benedict's 2010 visit to the UK

If you've felt that there's been increased discussion of religion in the British media in recent years, a new study shows that you're right. Coverage of popular religion, Christianity and public life, Islam and other religions and atheism and secularism has all gone up since the early 1980s. This is not restricted to news coverage, but is also evident in sports, entertainment and advertising; references to fate, angels, magic, ghosts, miracles, and fortune telling are common. The single largest growth has been in coverage of Islam and it is overwhelmingly negative: Islam is presented as 'a problem'. But coverage of Christianity is also high. Why should this be, when over this same period church attendance and orthodox Christian belief have declined? It seems that the stock of Christian symbols and stories continues to provide a means for expressing wonder and fear, moral outrage and disgust, for praising celebrities and high achievers, contemplating the unexplained, and coping with unaccountable horror and crisis.

Professor Kim Knott led the research funded by [the Religion and Society Programme](#) that established these findings. She and her team conducted a replication of an investigation of media portrayals of religion first carried out in 1982-83. In 2008-09 she, Elisabeth Poole and Teemu Taira analysed a month's content from the same newspapers: *The Sun*, *The Times* and *The Yorkshire Evening Post* and seven days TV from the same channels: BBC 1, BBC 2 and ITV, using the same methods. In addition, they reflected the array of contemporary outputs by looking at *The Guardian*, *The Daily Mail*, Channel 4 and Sky News. They also ran focus groups with the public, and looked in detail at coverage of the banning of Dutch MP Geert Wilders in 2009 from entering the UK. An unexpected opportunity was also taken up to research media coverage of Pope Benedict's 2010 visit to the UK, as the first project had looked at Pope John Paul's 1982 visit.

The team found that most references to Islam in the newspapers and on TV portray Muslims as extremists, terrorists and radicals. Other coverage, particularly in the tabloids, refers provocatively to the 'Islamification' of Britain, or shows Islam as problematic for social integration. The criminal and immoral behaviour of clergy often attracts media attention as well, and the liberal press frequently represent Christianity as anti-egalitarian and out-of-date on issues of gender and homosexuality. Newspapers and television attract audiences by focusing on conflict, deviance and, of course, celebrity. Freedom of speech, human rights, personal choice, and the belief that religion should be a private not public matter are just some of the secular – but nonetheless sacred – views discussed and often held by media professionals themselves. In sum, the growth of religious diversity has led to a rise in media references to all types of religion and belief. Religion is still reflected in the language of popular culture, and Christianity continues to be represented as part of national heritage and the British landscape. In a nation which is increasingly religiously-illiterate as a result of declining participation, the media are more important than ever for informing the public about religious matters.

Find out more...

- Contact [Kim Knott](#), [Elisabeth Poole](#) or [Teemu Taira](#).
- Listen to Kim Knott discussing this research:
http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/publications/podcasts/show/kim_knott_short_version_oct_2009
- Read Kim Knott's piece on 'Religion in the British Media' for the Economic and Social Research Council's magazine *Britain in 2011*: <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/publications/britain-in/>
- Look at some of the articles written from the project: Teemu Taira, Elisabeth Poole and Kim Knott, „Religion in the British media today”, in Owen Gower & Jolyon Mitchell (eds), *Religion and the News*, London: Ashgate, 2011; Teemu Taira, „Religion of the market economy” [„Markkinatalouden uskonto”], *AVEK: Journal of the Promotion Centre of Audiovisual Culture*, 1, 2009, 22-25; Kim Knott, „Theoretical and methodological resources for breaking open the secular and exploring the boundary between religion and non-religion”, *vol*, 2, 2010, pp. 115-133 (the pre-publication copy of the latter article is available from here: http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/publications/journal_articles)

You might also be interested in...

- The Religion and Society funded project 'Fitna- the video battle' with which Kim and her team have collaborated:
http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/uploads/docs/2011_01/1295364320_van_Zoonen_Phase_2_Small_Grant_Block.pdf
- Reading about the Religion and News conference run in Windsor in 2009 which the team are contributing to the book from:
http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/events/non_programme_events/show/religion_and_the_news_conference_windsor
- The Mediating Religion Network with which the project organized a joint conference on 'Social media and the sacred' and afternoon lecture and roundtable on debating religion and the media, June 2010, London:
<http://www.mediatingreligion.org/>
- Keeping an eye out for the Religion and Media Centre on which the project was consulted, and for the religion and media website for journalists
- The new undergraduate module at Leeds University on 'Religion and the Media' this project led to the development of: <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/trs/undergraduate.htm#Course>

Project Details

Award Title

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

Team

Principal Investigator: Prof Kim Knott (Leeds)

Co-Investigator: Dr Elizabeth Poole (Staffs)

Research Assistant: Dr Teemu Taira (Leeds)

University

University of Leeds

Research Partners

Dr Robert Towler

British Universities Film and Video Council

Advisory Board

Professor Stewart Hoover, Professor Marie Gillespie, Professor Gordon Lynch, Dr Jolyon Mitchell, Dr John Richardson, Michael Wakelin, Ruth Gledhill

Michael Wakelin Consulting Ltd subcontracted to provide research presented in the form of a radio programme on 'God on the radio' on the enduring relationship between Religion and Radio, to be produced Spring 2011

Jacqueline Gregory, academic journalist, employed as consultant to turn research findings into web resources for practising journalists

Annikka Mutanen, Finnish journalist and Reuters Fellow 2008-09

The Focus Group research company

Award Type

Phase 1 Large Grant

Key terms

media, newspaper, bbc, secular sacred, Islamophobia, kim knott, press



Arts & Humanities
Research Council

