

Research Proposal on The Effect of Portrayal of Religion in Media on People

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Introduction

The way certain things influence people can have far-reaching and profound results. One important entity in Western (or Westernized) culture to have such effects is what is known as the “mass media” (Lorimer & Gasher 2001). Mass media affects all sorts of thinking, and can communicate various ideas to large audiences. Because of the mass media’s ability to communicate to a very wide audience, it has the ability to enforce a sort of homogenous way of thinking for any specific subject, depending on the whim of the producers. This, of course, can have certain effects on subjects such as people and ideas, and what the audience will think about that subject.

One such subject that has slowly drawn the attention of the media is religion, especially in a public framework. Religion is a fundamental part of many people’s lives (Smith 1991, Lugo 1994), and the way the media portrays this topic can have a multitude of results, some positive, some negative, to religious people and religious institutions. Media portrayal can also have an effect on how people think of religion itself, which may impact politics and culture.

This is important because religion is currently garnering more of the media’s attention, due to recent political developments, especially in the United States (CNN 2005a, 2005b). This research proposal, therefore, attempts to address possible effects of media portrayal of religion, towards a wide audience of people. The question that the

research paper answers is: What is the relationship between personal attitudes and opinions towards religion and the portrayal of it in the media?

Literature Review

Since the proposed research will primarily be about the effects of media portrayal, we can look at the history of media studies to get a better glimpse of previous knowledge. Media studies is a relatively new field, not popularized until the 1960s, when new technologies emerged that would allow theorists and researchers to begin to see the full effect of mass media on a societal and personal basis (McLuhan 1964: 4). Because of its new-ness, and because the original theories have not been completely disproved, the field is still relatively homogenous (Babe 2000, McAllister 2004).

During the beginning of the popularization, theorists and writers such as Harold Innis, George Grant, Marshall McLuhan, and others dominated media studies. For example, writer/theorist Marshall McLuhan concentrates on how media and technology affect society as a whole; writing extensively on how, through technology, society is becoming more and more connected (McLuhan & Powers, 1989). Most writers will agree to this. Communications technology does, indeed, allow society to become increasingly inter-connected, and communications technology does change society one way or another (Babe 2000). Despite this unity on the basic effects, various writers will concentrate on which technology to focus on, the effects of inter-connectedness, and other issues.

These different focuses allowed for media studies to grow. Grant, for example, wrote on the social, ethical and moral issues surrounding the advancement of technology, and the unchecked spread of mass media (Babe 2000). Grant, being a person with intense moral convictions, also focused his work on the danger of modern capitalism, and the loss of identity, while bringing mass media and technology into the mix (Grant 1965). Harold Innis wrote on economics and mass media, with one of his main focuses being the staples economy (what resources are most essential for a nation) (Babe 2000:64), and the more material aspects of media (space, economics, resources, etc.) (Innis 1951:41).

The variety in the field of media studies, early on, can be attributed to the backgrounds those theorists came from. Since then, there has been a great deal of theory written in the field of media studies, evolving as technology evolves. The field itself is filled with variations, with disagreements, and various focuses. Originally, media studies came from a conglomeration of technical studies, sociology,

The field was originally dominated by people from other disciplines, such as political economy for Harold Innis, English literature for Marshall McLuhan, and philosophy for George Grant (Babe 2000). These, and other early theorists have influenced their “descendants” in a very significant way.

Marshall McLuhan was one of the most influential early thinkers in media studies. While not the first to realize it (Harold Innis, and previous thinkers decided that

within communications, technology played a role) (McAllister 2004), McLuhan theorized that, as said before, media does influence social behaviour. His theories regarding media often stemmed from human perceptions of things, and how those various perceptions of objects allowed a human to imagine that object to be an extension of the body (Babe 2000:282). This meant that, for example, by using the picture of an axe, the presenter could symbolize death, strength, justice, and a host of other possibilities. McLuhan also theorized that with the example given, a person could imagine him/herself holding the axe, in an unconscious manner (Babe 2000:283).

According to McLuhan, media is generally divided into three types: Oral, Written, and Electronic (Babe 2000:285-289). While this research incorporates primarily electronic forms of media, they appeal to different senses. Radio is primarily auditory (oral), and print is a primarily visual (written) media. Electronic media, argues McLuhan, combines human senses and merges internal and external. Many would argue that television is one of the first forms media to do this (McLuhan & Powers 1989), as it begins to allow the blurring of the external and internal. Innis (who wrote before McLuhan) and Grant (who wrote concurrently with McLuhan) both agree to this, but using a different focus for each writer.

Much of Marshall McLuhan's, George Grant's, and Harold Innis' theories were broad ones, in that they were based on society's actions and reactions (McLuhan & Powers 1989). Since the early theorists, others have come along and added to what the

original theories were about, as stated earlier. Each of the three forms of media have affected Western society has had its own history, with its own timeline. Print came onto the scene in the 16th century, and changed slowly. Radio began in the early 20th century, becoming popular in the 1920s. Television became popular only 30 years later, in the 1950s (Postman 1985). All of these forms of media fall under “mass media” (Lorimer & Gasher 2001) but television is where writer Neil Postman begins to see the blurring of society and personhood.

In Neil Postman’s *Amusing Ourselves To Death*. Postman begins to break down the barriers between societal-based research and personal-based research, by taking a look at how electronic media affects people, on a more personal basis (it still is relatively societal-based, just less so) (Postman 1985). Postman uses entertainment, especially derived from television, to show how society is slowly tuning out of the real world and inwards, evolving into a sort of hyper-individualism (Postman 1985).

Along with Postman, others have joined in to do research on both personal and societally-based theories on media. However, both McLuhan and Postman were among the first to do this by arguing that personal influence is domain that stems from advertising and television (McLuhan & Powers 1989, Bolton 2000:629). In a research article done in 2000, researcher Teresa Bolton uses a child’s imagination to show how television can influence children’s thinking. Bolton uses cognitive behaviour and media studies to exemplify her point (Bolton 2000:631).

However, even though more and more research is beginning to look at personal-based responses to media, much of the previous research is still very much societal-based. In an article written by Maxwell McCombs and Amy Reynolds, the pair look at how news reporting shapes our images (they allude to television images) of the world (McCombs & Reynolds 2002). In the article, they talk about how various agendas come into play, which affect media policy (Bryant & Zillman 2002:11). Policy often affects the subjects, which, in this case, happens to be media viewers (Palys 2003). This is an example of the continuing trend of how researchers in media studies use two points of views to allow for the nature of media studies, and yet, still look at some personal opinions.

Beyond just taking into the nature of previous research into consideration, virtually all previous research done within the last 40 years all have something to do with McLuhan's ideas on electronic media. Some may not agree with McLuhan (Postman 1985:4) but all take into consideration the rapid advancement and adoption of technology. This can have effects on a great number of aspects of Western society, from politics (McLeod, Kosicki et. al 2002:215, McLuhan & Powers 1989:150) to entertainment (Postman 1985), and more.

Because of the limitations imposed by previous sources, and because there is a lack of research in the general area of religion and media, this research paper will attempt to deal with as much personal data, since it is known that religion is as much a

personal idea as it is a societal one (Smith 1990). The proposed research will look at personal responses, but, because of the dual nature of both aspects of the research (religion and media), it will still have to keep a firm standing in societal-based research. Both religion and mass media may affect personal opinions and attitudes, but they still, by nature, affect large groups of people. This research will get a better glimpse at the joining of the two areas.

Research Question and Related Variables

Despite the extensive material we have on the subject of influence of the media, as well as a large volume of research on the subject of the influence of religion, there is a scarcity in research on the subject of media influence on attitudes towards religion. I feel that with recent news events (CNN, 2005a), the media's attention is slowly turning towards religion and religious institutions. Because of the gaining importance of religion in the eyes of the media, and because there is a lack of research done to gauge how the media influences attitudes towards religion, this research will help begin to analyze some of the possible trends that may occur.

The question of what is the relationship between personal attitudes/opinions towards religion and the portrayal of religion in the media is an important question, not only because of the previously mentioned upswing of media attention, but for other reasons as well. Religion is slowly becoming more and more visible in politics (CNN

2005b), and popular culture (CNN 2005c). Because of this increase in visibility and portrayal of religion, people may have various reactions to the content (McLuhan 1964).

Why should we care what reactions people have? It is important to have a grasp of the attitudes and opinions of the audiences because it not only can affect future broadcasting policy (for example, if France decided to limit religious content on its public media) but also it may give religious institutions a grasp on what people think of them. The research will be done because of its impact towards religious institutions (if one of their goals is evangelism) as well as media broadcasters (either in print, radio, or television formats).

With that in mind, the question stated can be approached via many different routes. An interview can be just as valid as an oral history of a small group of people. I decided that the research will go through a limited questionnaire route, because of limited means of funding and abilities. I also wish to capture a wide response and try to find trends in the responses. This is because I believe while personally interviewing people is an important way of understanding responses in detail, to be able to see and interpret trends is equally as important, due to their ability to allow for a bigger picture of "what's going on?" However, since trends cannot be predicted at this time, they are not so much important as just capturing the opinions/attitudes of a wide group of people.

Before we go on, a number of limits will be set for the benefit of organization within the research material. We will be looking at the media as it is represented through television (any service), radio, and newsprint (both newspapers and news-magazines). I believe these three are the most entrenched forms of media (McLuhan 1964) for now, and the widest range of people will have access to these three.

Other forms of media, while also possibly widespread, will not be looked at, due to further complications of audience and choice of programming. One such media source that would be a problem for representativeness would be the Internet, as people who use it tend to be of European, North American, or East Asian background (IWS 2005). Another problem with other media sources would be programming choices. Again, using the Internet as an example, people who use the Internet may only rarely browse news sites or religious material, but, because of possible economic limitations, only use e-mail services. When I talk about the phrase *attitudes and opinions*, I refer to any responses audiences get that are directly related to what they are reading, watching, or listening to, and by the word *personal*, I mean attitudes and opinions that originate from a person's self, and not of what other people say (although I will allow for past external influences from anytime up to when the respondent first reads the questionnaire).

Methods & Design

As the topic is about the effects of media portrayal, and as the basis of previous theory is mostly based on societal effects, I have elected to also do a wide-area sample.

This is because of the very nature of mass media. It is supposed to go to everyone, and the three forms of media I limited this research exemplify the “mass” part of “mass media.”

Since research done on the relationship of portrayal of religion in the media is scarce, there is no real solid backing for any hypotheses. Thus, for this research, I will not state any hypotheses, but rather directly administer a questionnaire to a wide sample, to allow for observational data. Since the research is primarily based on personal attitudes and opinions, the research will sample people as the units of analysis. Because of the financial and physical limitations imposed, I can only research people living in the city of Vancouver, in British Columbia.

To get a sampling population for Vancouver, the Vancouver Property Tax assessment rolls for 2002 (which is available for use from the City of Vancouver archives) can be used. I use this list because it contains a large number of addresses, it is available for use, and it is a starting point for a researcher like me. Therefore, the sampling population would be homeowners in Vancouver.

As with most, if not all, sampling frames, a certain segment of the entire sampling universe would be excluded. For my sampling frame, it does not include any people who do not pay property tax (such as those living in apartments, renting, homeless, or people), which can theoretically encompass a wide variety of attitudes and opinions, separate from the homeowners. Other related problems can do with how the list is

organized. An alphabetical list would be theoretically more random than a list that orders by address.

Another set of problems is that the assessment list for property tax is dated from 2002 (City of Vancouver Archives 2002). This means that there is a level of inaccuracy in that people may have moved since then, or property leases may have expired, or other such problems related to using dated information. While one can use the property tax list as a source of representativeness, such as giving clues about names in relation to ethnic background, financial status being gleaned from addresses, and other minor clues, I believe these clues cannot form a basis for representativeness in this research. Therefore none, beyond a random selection of names, will be used.

Despite the faults, a number of benefits can be gleaned from the use of this list. The property tax list virtually guarantees that people are actually living on the property. A possible foreseeable problem with using such a list would be that people who own property would generally have a sizable income, and would have at least completed a high-school level education. While this problem ignores people without such an education, it may allow a higher return rate, as people of higher education may take care to read the questionnaire.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection is an important part of research, as data collecting can help you record your data so that you don't forget it. Data collection also allows for analysis of

data, so that conclusions, theories, and interpretations can be drawn. Data collection can come in many forms, depending on the research. Transcription can be used for face-to-face interviews, focus groups, or other research where interaction is required (qualitative research) (Palys 2003:8). For this research, a mail-out questionnaire, two to three pages in length, will suffice to answer the research question, as the research question is generally broad in nature, and we can extrapolate trends and conclusions with more confidence, since it is based on a wider scale.

Since the sampling frame (the property tax list) provides a means to address the units of analysis, and we can use the addresses listed to send information to the sample, data collection can be relatively simple and straightforward. A pre-written questionnaire will be mailed out using one in 1000 homeowners from the property tax list. Each questionnaire will be two to three pages, for brevity (please see appendix for a list of questions), and will contain a self-addressed envelope with paid postage. The return address will be a neutral location (a post office box can be used).

The sampled population will fill out the questionnaire and use the envelopes to mail the questionnaires back to me. I expect a 20 percent return rate for these questionnaires, although for mail-out questionnaires, it can be harder to predict. This predicted return rate should allow for a glimpse of possible trends. All returned questionnaires will be kept in a locked box after fetching them from the post office box (which will be done once a week).

Costs

Most of the research procedure can be done at little to no cost. I will be hiring assistants at a wage of \$8.00 per hour to help me with sending the questionnaires out. No monetary reward will be given to respondents. However, the costs that the data collection methods involve can add up. Since I can operate on a budget of \$1200-1400, this should be enough to fulfill the sampling method used. Transportation to and from the post office box is free, as I will make sure to get one that is located within the Greater Vancouver Transit Authority (GVTA) (this allows the use of low-cost public transportation).

As stated earlier, much of the cost will be used in the data collection method. Printing the pages (two to three pages per questionnaire), will cost one box of paper (priced at \$32.94 per box, plus tax), plus the cost of toner (just in case one runs out), which is priced at \$116.96 plus tax (Staples 2005). Total postage (at \$0.96 per household), plus four boxes envelopes (at \$14.63 per 100-box) will be as much as we can afford, after all other costs (such as wages and printing costs) are added up, to a limit of \$1200 to \$1400 (depending on funding sources).

Analysis

After data collection is complete, and the tail wave of respondents have responded (**Palys 2003**), the data will be read, and numbers and responses will be recorded onto an encrypted file which will contain coded responses (based on the

choices given in the question). Each question will then be assigned a total number, so that if 72 people answered (A) for question one, that number will be recorded.

After all the results are tallied and the more personal answers are recorded, the originals will be kept in a locked box, until the end of the research. The tallied/recorded answers will be used for data analysis, and drawing any conclusions to see if there are trends, and to see if there are anomalies within the data which allows me to see what respondents' attitudes and opinions of religion are.

The questionnaire will contain a number of blank spaces for participants to fill in their thoughts, rather than answer all "multiple-choice" format questions. This is where the personal opinions and attitudes come in. Since the information cannot be tallied, special care will be given to ensure that the information is read and compiled.

Since I feel this research could be part of other efforts at this area, the data analysis could then be given to broadcasting policymakers and regulators (such as the FCC or the CRTC in North America). The research makes no intentional distinction between the beliefs the participants adhere to, so this research could become a small basis for future policy

Ethics

Because of the possibility that the data collected in this research might be shared with third parties (something I cannot fully predict yet), any participants will be informed of such. A specially made consent form will be used, so that participants who

may be otherwise impatient can do the questionnaires. The consent form will require the signature of participants to ensure their age. All signatories are assumed to be over 18, unless I suspect otherwise. The return package will be disregarded unless the signature of the participant is present.

As soon as I receive the return package, the originals will be locked away as soon as I am able to copy the information down. All names will be changed in the copied part of the response, to ensure anonymity. I will ensure the least amount of harm will be done to the participants. Addresses will not be given out, nor will names, should a third party want them. The data will be destroyed as soon as compiling and tallying is complete. For further ethics consideration, please see appendices II and III for more detail.

Conclusion

The research being done here is just a tip of the iceberg, in a sense. Because of cost limitations and the lack of previous research, the proposed research here will not be a comprehensive research. I still believe that the research can be a part of something larger, if a third party becomes involved and interested in the study of religion and media, but that is not what this research intends to begin. This research still leaves gaping holes in the methods and sampling. Further research could be done in a more qualitative manner, and they could also be done in a different location in the world, or with people that were excluded from this research.

Appendix I

Questionnaire

1. How old are you? (Circle group which best describes you)

- i. <18 years
- ii. 18-25
- iii. 26-35
- iv. 36-55
- v. 56-65
- vi. >65 years

2. Do you use the radio regularly (at least twice a week)? (Circle one)

- i. Yes
- ii. No

3. Do you use the radio regularly (at least twice a week)? (Circle one)

- i. Yes
- ii. No

4. Do you use the radio regularly (at least twice a week)? (Circle one)

- i. Yes
- ii. No

5. What is religion to you? (Please write anything here that has something to do with religion)

6. How often do you hear about religion on the 3 forms of media listed above?

7. Do your thoughts on religion come from the media? Or are they from somewhere else (please specify)

8. What do you think of religion as it is portrayed in the media?

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