Introduction: Relaunching the Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture

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Welcome to the relaunch of the Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture! After six years of open-access publication, we are starting a new network of partnerships for this journal, including a new publisher (Brill), a new partner organization (the International Society for Media, Religion and Culture) and a new pricing system. We are also expanding our scope beyond digital technologies to include the whole field of religion, media and culture. This short introduction, co-authored by the Editor of this journal (Tim Hutchings) and the President of our partner society (Mia Lövheim), is designed to explain what the journal now represents and how it will work in the future.

Why Study Religion, Media and Culture?

Religious ideas and practices are communicated, learned, represented, enacted and resisted through media. Religion circulates today through social media, is discussed and depicted in the news and becomes a source of imagery for film and television. Popular understandings of religious belief and practice are formed in part by encounters with these representations in journalism and entertainment media.

Religious institutions and entrepreneurs produce their own media, too, from books to radio and TV preachers to religious videogames. These religious media may circulate through mass media channels (where space for religious broadcasting can be purchased or legally demanded), but they can...
also be distributed independently, through commercial enterprises owned by religious organisations or through social media networks. The distribution of attention and authority between competing religious leaders, spaces and institutions is determined at least in part by how effectively those actors use new and old media to reach their audiences.

Of course, media production does not determine reception: religious and spiritual practitioners may be influenced by these mediations, but they consume them alongside other sources of mediated news, entertainment and social communication, finding meaning in their own blends and combinations of influences. Practitioners of different religious and non-religious traditions and identities can encounter one another through media, creating new spaces for (and new mediated representations of) dialogue, debate and conflict.

Attention to these and other mediations of religion and spirituality contributes to scholarly understanding of both religion and media. For example, journalists and news photographers are now key public communicators of information about religious identities, ideas, attitudes and practices. This means that any study of contemporary perceptions of religion must include attention to news media, and it also means that media researchers interested in news making and the public reception of news or entertainment media can use religion as a case study. Journalistic depictions of religious majorities, minorities and the relations between them are politically significant and socially influential, and are therefore of scholarly interest across a range of academic disciplines.

As pointed out by Stewart Hoover and Knut Lundby (1997) in the first edited volume of research in media, religion and culture, earlier research in media studies and cultural studies had not seriously addressed religion, and religious studies had largely ignored the question of how the increasing mediation of social relations and meaning moulds life in modern society. Studying the intersections between religion and media can also help us to critique and destabilize received categories in academic disciplines. If “religion” establishes an authorized relationship between “sacred” and “profane” spheres, or between natural and supernatural levels of being, then “religion” itself can be defined in terms of a system of approved and restricted media technologies. This kind of approach to religion as media (see for example Stolow, 2005; Meyer, 2006) draws attention to the materiality, embodiment and lived experience of religion, alongside its cognitive and ideological dimensions. Instead of studying what a religious group believes, we can examine how beliefs, practices and identities are communicated, enacted or challenged, an approach which centres questions about how religion and non-religion are defined and distinguished in specific communicative contexts.