

Shaun Allen Casey, Wesley Theological Seminary



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The AAR Public Understanding of Religion Committee convened a Special Topics Forum at the AAR's Annual Meeting in Atlanta that explored the state of religion reporting. Committee member Shaun Allen Casey convened the panel, which consisted of Adelle Banks from Religion News Service, Sarah Posner of *Religion Dispatches*, Mark Silk of Trinity College, and Bob Smietana of the *Tennessean* newspaper. What follows is a summary of their remarks.

Adelle Banks commented:

The so-called 'God beat' most certainly is not dead but rather is being transformed by the Internet and the economy.

Blogging and Twitter in particular have increased places where reporters and readers find and read religion news. At Religion News Service, traffic to our daily [Religion News Roundup](#) on our blog has increased tenfold in the last year.

The economy has left fewer people to do the work even as there are more stories to cover. Some mourning is in order over the departures of fine journalists from newspapers. Some, fortunately, have not left the beat but have moved from print to the Web.

Coverage has changed as fewer reporters are able to travel to where the news is. I used to travel to the annual Southern Baptist Convention, for instance, but recently have covered it remotely.

With more reporters on the religion beat juggling other beats and often having little religious knowledge, the expertise of scholars is needed more than ever. So, when reporters reach out, please call or e-mail them back.

Sarah Posner noted that religion stories that used to receive lengthy coverage in print media are now often going uncovered or are receiving marginal media attention. The pressing question is how is this void being filled currently? While there is still good coverage of religion, there is a lot of bad reporting as well.

One area of particular concern is the lack of expertise by reporters in covering Islam. The Park 51 controversy in New York City from the summer of 2010 is a prime example of the failure of the press to grasp a story. The result was that ideological voices dominated the coverage.

[Religion Dispatches](#) shows that a journalist can have a perspective and a view of a story. But reporters need to be able to assess the ideological dimensions of a story they are covering.

Mark Silk noted that with the expansion of bloggers and tip sheets from insiders there is more information available today on religion. The old news adage of “call Martin Marty” no longer works. As the religion beat has opened to more players, partisanship has increased. Yet despite more information and more people commenting on religion on the Internet, the nuanced understanding of religion may have decreased.

The downside is that religion reporters are spread very thin. Local coverage of religion has probably suffered as a result of newspaper cutbacks.

Bob Smietana noted the shrinking number of religion reporters at newspapers nationwide. Too many good stories are going unreported. There is less in person reporting and much more work being done from the newsroom.

Stories that take time to research and write are being squeezed by “now or never” stories that demand immediate attention and resources. Smietana was able to do a six-part story over five weeks on Islam in middle Tennessee, which ran counter to this pressure.

He noted that he believed he was the luckiest reporter in America since he got to cover religion in Nashville.

The consensus of the panel is that the “God beat” is far from dead, but it is suffering from the financial pressures in the news business and thus the nature of coverage is evolving. Solid reporting still exists, but the future is far from clear. As newspapers shed reporters of all kinds, religion coverage sometimes suffers disproportionately. There is a sense that with the emergence of alternative platforms on the Internet to traditional print coverage it is too early to tell just exactly where news reporting on religion is heading for the long term.