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Claire Badaracco is Professor of Communication in the College of Communication at Marquette University, Milwaukee. She is the editor of Quoting God: How Media Shape Ideas about Religion (Baylor University Press: 2005) and has written three books about printing history. Currently, she teaches media ethics; marketplace writing; and cultural identity, media, and world religions.

The covers of *Time* and *Newsweek* in December 2005, the year that *Publishers Weekly* dubbed the year of the religion book, were a seasonal cliché. But in 2006, secular sentimentalities precluded religious images on postage stamps and the use of “Happy Holidays” rather than “Merry Christmas” became a matter for media debate. Beyond the surface, higher-gloss magazines often wear their ideology on their sleeves. Recently, *Harper’s* addressed “Jesus without the Miracles: Thomas Jefferson’s Bible and the Gospel of Thomas”; even *National Geographic* discussed “The Secrets of Long Life” among the Seventh-Day Adventists; the *Atlantic Monthly* questioned “Is God an Accident?” and examined Christianization of Hollywood from *The Passion of the Christ* to *Narnia*; *Newsweek* heralded *The Da Vinci Code*; and *Mother Jones* produced a special issue on “God and Country: Where the Christian Right is Leading Us.”

Is religion the definitive question of our age because we are at war in the biblical Holy Land, because fundamentalists attacked the United States, because Evangelicals are in the White House? Or is there something about the beginning of a new century, something deeper occurring in these media reports about the massification of beliefs that will define our age for future historians?

The phrase “agenda-setting” in the news means that the media tells us not what to think about but what to think. But today there has been a sea change — arguably, the media has assumed a quasi-clerical role if it tells us what our religious beliefs are saying about our identity as a people, a nation, and the role that faith plays in shaping our collective memories about what matters, what is possible, and whom to fear. The larger question remains: How do journalists stay “objective” about religion news? Many scholars have taken up this question in their research.

In a scholarly sense, the body of knowledge that constitutes the field of media and religion is interdisciplinary and integrates sociological, historical, and ethnographic methodologies through negotiated or mediated points of view, from the standpoint of academic knowledge in fields of communication, religious studies, and political and popular culture. Leaders in the field, such as Stewart Hoover, Lynn Clark, Rodney Stark, Diane Winston, John Schmalzbauer, Jolyon Mitchell, and many others, have demonstrated in important books not only how religion permeates the news, but how religions use media, and how believers congregate online or view films and hear music, all aspects of contemporary media that help express individual beliefs in public ways, and which contribute to how people see themselves — and how they see the Other.

Through my course in media and religion, my students learn that how they see the Other determines how they know themselves, and they use media to reach that critical understanding.

When I created an experimental class titled “Cultural Identity, Media and World Religions,” I used a broadband network to create a “linked” classroom, where a course on media and religion was cotaught with three instructors at three different Jesuit universities, with interdisciplinary expertise including religious studies, mass media, and sociology of religion. Our first collaborators included Loyola New Orleans (Catherine Wessinger) and the University of Santa Clara (Paul Soukup). We no longer are limited to other Jesuit schools. I am interested in new, future opportunities for collaboration, and in short-term, or one-class, collaborations on varied assignments with other schools. This year, we are linked with Dublin City University (Colin Kenny), Middle Tennessee State University (Paul Wells), and the U.S. Embassy in Guatemala (David Young) to talk about how journalists are trained to treat religion in other countries.

For the midterm project in the “Media and Religion” class, students thousands of miles apart collaborate in virtual teams, gathering data about regional differences in religious denominations other than their own. They are required to go into their respective communities and interview religious leaders on two points: 1) How does that particular religion use media to communicate, and how do its believers use mass media; and 2) What image does the person think the mass media conveys to the public about their religious tradition or denomination. The regional teams report back to one another using a common course site discussion board. Comparing data, they distill the results into a compare-and-contrast/similarities-and-differences PowerPoint presentation of six to eight frames, uploaded onto the common course site. All students at each site are required to read one another’s work in preparation for a linked discussion with the larger group via videoconference, one of a dozen during the semester.

For their final project at the Marquette site, students produce a digital ethnograph: a triptych of interviews with religious leaders in three different faith traditions other than their own. Their line of questioning is to follow one theme, such as “Creation,” “the Face of God,” “Initiation Rituals,” “Beauty,” “Sanctuary.” They condense and edit hours of videocam interviews into one five-minute digital product (using iMovie or Movie Maker, Adobe Editor, or Final Cut Pro).

I am less concerned with their production skills, however, and accept all levels of competence in this. I am very committed to their using the media to get out of their comfort zone, and into the churches, temples, mosques, and synagogues in the area, to talk with strangers, and to come away with the exhilaration of having met with someone whose appearance, ethnicity, clothes, or age is very different from their own. The videocamera is merely a bridge to conversation: the product is less important than the process through which they compose the digital ethnograph. The media use is an excuse, it forces them out of their shells, and many have reported they love it, that it made them talk with strangers about deeply held beliefs, an experience that causes them to understand “lived religion” in a new dimension.

In this, my eighth year of teaching media and religion classes in this way, I now periodically try to construct a bilingual or international class and routinely link with scholars and classes at state universities. In the final week of last semester, for example, we linked one day with the Tibetan news desk of the Voice of America and Al Hurrah TV Iraq, and on another day, with a 28-year veteran of Vatican Radio. Students then were in a good situation to analyze how government propaganda differed from religious broadcasting, not only theoretically, but more specifically how the religious broadcasters used podcasting, communicated with channels domestically and abroad, and how the government veiled their identity.

The crux of the pedagogical question for me is how to balance intellectual inquiry with introspective reflection, and how those two elements permit a student to grow in self-knowledge, understanding, and awareness of their own individual faith and ethnic identity as it frames their broader public understanding of the nation's identity, especially as a constitutional democracy grounded in the First Amendment that articulates both freedom of the press and the separation of church and state.

I want my students to be able, finally, to assert critical distance from their own beliefs in order to deconstruct media culture in the sense that it homogenizes the idea of belief, or in a political context where it differentiates beliefs, or in the sense that the sitcom or popular-culture world normalizes nonbelief or "secular" values. Though I think this distinction still holds, unquestionably, the sea change alluded to in the lead to this article demonstrates how media has taken up the subject of religion in a deeper way. Similarly, those powers of critical thinking applied to deconstructing clichés of media or popular culture ought to admit the students into another avenue of inquiry, about the nature of deeper culture, about how thought leaders influence public opinion and popular belief through political rhetoric.

Along with growth in critical thinking skills, on religiously affiliated campuses, students in late adolescence have an innate resistance to inherited faith or truth." They need at this age to discover their own truth, and sometimes that leads them back home and sometimes into new levels of reflection about the meaning of the soul in the Eastern and Western traditions. The integration of technology and mass media in the class assignments and course structure creates a type of meta-discourse. Understanding how geographical differences result in differences among the same faith traditions helps them to situate not only their own identity, but to develop the skills to encounter the Other, to deconstruct fear as an inheritance of mass media. If religions are made up of rituals, then certainly for mass media majors, understanding how media ritual functions in public belief is central to their education on a Jesuit campus.

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