

# Can the Church use media communication channels? Inherent features of media communication channels relative to religious messages in the media



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**ABSTRACT:** The present study is part of a complex research project dealing with the suitability of media language to spread religious messages. It deals with the nature of the communication channel of the mass-media. It is based on the qualitative research carried out especially by means of the methods of focus groups and Delphi Techniques. Starting with the key issue of the function of journalism, the study gradually investigates the attributes of the media communication channels according to their approach towards religious topics. Based on this criterion, the research divides media into two groups: secular and religious media. The study carefully investigates their internal motivation, commerciality, democratic nature and publicity, agenda setting and capacity to change people.

**KEYWORDS:** media, religion, commerciality, agenda setting, formation



## INTRODUCTION

Can media language carry religious content? This fundamental question has been the subject of recent research conducted by the Department of Journalism of the Philosophical Faculty at the Catholic University in Ružomberok. Sponsored by the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic, this research was conducted in cooperation with the Faculty of Institutional Social Communication of the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross in Rome.

The research was inspired by previous projects carried out at the Department (Kolková, 2008; Gazda, 2009) focusing on the coverage of religious topics in the media. Previous projects have pointed to an interesting fact that the news coverage of identical topics by the religious media has sharply contrasted with that of secular media, even to the extent that an almost “intersection-free” set of underlying facts communicated by the media could be observed. The products of such coverage fall into two extremes: the non-journalistically covered and, from the recipient’s

perspective, almost indigestible reviews of religious events brought by religious media — and handy and journalistically covered, however completely without the true essence of the event by secular media. For instance, the religious media covered the news about the Pope's visit to a foreign country through reviews of the Pope's homilies and addresses while secular media focused on pilgrims, hotel managers, gift shop sellers, construction of the viewing stands, and a variety of specific issues only partially related to the visit, such as Church scandals and controversies, especially sex scandals, relations with Jews or other Christian denominations, financing and disestablishment.

This observation has prompted the question as to whether the causes of such differences were objective or subjective in their nature, i.e. whether they are inevitable, or if a kind of systemic flaw resides therein. Since this study focuses specifically on the problem of transmission channel in media communication of religious messages, the question subject to examination is how the inherent qualities of a media communication channel affect the transmission of religious messages on the one hand, and how do such religious messages cope with the inherent qualities of media communication channels when transmitted through these communication channels.

Based on our previous research and practical experience, the media communication channel is likely to constitute fundamental impediments to the transmission of religious messages and preclude them from being transmitted effectively. Thus, the assumption is that religious messages will be transmitted through the communication channel in an impoverished form.

This study deals with concepts such as religious message, religious media, or secular media, in particular. The term “religious message” refers to a piece of communication originating in the church environment, which a communicator seeks to spread using a medium. The concept of religious media is broader than church media — it not only includes media owned by the church, but also private media which position themselves as religious. The term “secular media” refers to other media which do not position themselves as religious.

## **STATE OF THE ART**

### **Institutional framework**

More comprehensive research studies of the relationship between religion and media date back to the 1980s. A relatively small circle of scholars who explored the subject have managed to establish several specialized institutes devoted to scholarly research and public debate on these issues — among others the Centre for Religion and Media at New York University, Centre for Religion and Society at the University of Amsterdam, or Centre for Media, Religion and Culture at the University of Colorado.

The academic debate on this subject is also taking place in printed journals such as *Journal of Media and Religion* or *Journal of Culture and Religion*.

A thoughtful discussion on the subject takes place during the International Conferences of Media, Religion and Culture (ICMRC) held in various parts of the world since 1994. The first conference was held in Uppsala, Sweden, and the 7th session was held in 2010 in Toronto, Canada. Last year the participants at the conference have established a common scientific association led by Stewart M. Hoover from the University of Colorado, who is also the director of the Center for Media, Religion and Culture, established in 2006 at the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Colorado in Boulder, the organizing entity of the conferences.

Three interesting collective works have been published so far from the conferences: *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture* (eds. S.M. Hoover and K. Lundby, 1997), *Practising Religion in the Age of the Media* (eds. S.M. Hoover and L. Schofield Clark, 2002) and *Mediating Religion: Conversations in Media, Religion, and Culture* (eds. J. Mitchell and S. Marriage, 2003).

## **Classification**

In 2008, the editors of the *Journal of Media and Religion* identified the following three key areas of research into religion and media:

1. Proliferation of mediated religion (the media create multiple places of worship beyond the physical walls of traditional congregations),
2. Religious audiences as interpretive communities (shared interpretations of popular media content are increasingly important in understanding religious groups),
3. Media criticism (critiquing media genres and texts) (Stout & Buddenbaum, 2008, p. 226).

This classification can be accepted, however, for the purpose of our research, it needs to be extended as follows:

1. Mediated religion
  - a. religious impact of the media
  - b. religion as media
2. Media criticism
  - a. relationship between sacred and profane
  - b. anti-religious prejudice in the media
  - c. media approach to new religious movements
3. Religious media audience.

## **The religious impact of media**

Khojaste and Kalantari (2009) dealt with the philosophical account of the relationship between religion and media and distinguished two opposite media approaches:

the instrumentalist approach (positive: media can be used) and essentialist approach (negative: there is an abyss between the media and religion). The integrated approach can be regarded as a compromise between the above two positions (complementary functions of traditional and modern media to attain religious objectives) as developed by Bahonar (2009).

Stolow (2005) insists that it is the media which provide a platform for new forms of religious publicity in non-religious dominant public spheres, such as a religious counter-public (an alternative regardless of the state and civil systems) and split-public (dialogical symbiosis of societies with different cultural backgrounds). The editors of the collection of essays *Religion, Media and the Public Sphere* Meyer and Moors (2006) present the idea of a so-called mediated religion, which constructs new forms of civil discussion and public discourse.

Several scholars examined the problem of media in the hands of religious fundamentalists. The rise of fundamentalism enhanced by media was proved by Murdock (1997). Thomas (2008) analyzed the communication strategies of Christian fundamentalists in India and emphasized the political economy of religion.

### **Religion as media**

The idea of identifying religion with the media instead of examining parallel functions of religion as a distinct phenomenon from media is strongly supported (Stolow, 2005). Stolow supports the idea of sensuous religious presence (religion materialized through human senses). In 2008, this was subject of a special edition of *Material Religion*. Meyer (2008), the editor of the journal, concludes that religion builds bridges between man and transcendence, whereby man overcomes the distance between those two. In that process religion makes the image of transcendence complete and shapes it. Analogically, the media give a material form to the transcendence.

Common media functions of religion and mass media were also examined by De la Cruz (2009) who points out that in certain situations religion and media even change their roles or strengthen their positions conjunctively by means of two processes: mediation and substitution.

### **Sacrum and profanum**

The myth that the media are agents of secularization is denied by most scholars. Stolow (2005) insists that scholars should seek a deeper and more profound understanding of the relation between religion and media. De la Cruz (2009) provides an alternative in the theory of “convergent media” — binary categories of secular and religious, which drive contemporary ethnography and social theory.

In his content analysis Silk (1995) states the following two key arguments: (1) the hypothesis of the secularization role of the media was not proved and (2) there exist

socially constructed moral categories, which are also accepted by journalists. He calls them conventionalized story types and identifies them with the *topoi* taken from classical rhetorical theory. For religious topics, these story types express certain moral attitudes. Silk outlines seven story types: good works, tolerance, hypocrisy, false prophecy, inclusion, supernatural belief, declension. The ancient Greek *topoi*, as a category of commonly shared ideas, is examined by González Gaitano (2009) and Rončáková (2010) as part of their research into religion and media.

Hoover and Venturelli (1996) both suggest that scholars should refrain from trying to draw a demarcation line between secular and religious, and that they should see the media as fundamentally “religious.” Here, secularism is perceived as any other ritualized system of imaging and these two authors attempt to unearth its fundamental religiosity.

### **Media bias against religion**

The view that journalists approach religious topics with a bias is supported by Zasepa (2003). He provides several reasons for preconceptions on the part of journalists against religion: pseudo-liberalism, cynicism, consumerism, control and complexity. A chasm of misunderstanding and ignorance separates journalists and church leaders, as concluded by Dart and Allen (1993). According to these two scholars, however, the tension between religious leaders and the press is more the result of ignorance about how to handle religious stories than any antagonism toward religion per se. Other scholars find news values the cause of the lack of media interest in the religious activities of Christians. For instance, Winston (2007) argues that social activities of Christian leftists are regarded as natural, continuous and not newsworthy. The absence of specialized religion editors is regarded as one of the main drawbacks of secular media in their approach to religious topics (Shupe, 1994; Wright, 1997, p. 106).

Shupe (1997) argues that media “framing” of religious organizations provides an index of acculturation and control over valuable resources, such as the access to news production that shapes the organization’s public image. Contreras (2007) also identifies some general beliefs related to *topoi* behind individual frames related to the way the secular press informs about the Catholic Church. Gazda (2009) specializes in media framing of the events in the Vatican, and compares their coverage of secular and religious periodicals. He blames the secular media for inconsistent verification of information, superficiality, tabloidization and promotion of negativity. For Gazda, religious media are susceptible to buck-passing, lack of professionalism and inferior-quality output marked by inconsistencies, positive bias and focus on message.

### **New religious movements**

Wright (1997, p. 104), the editor of a special edition of the *Review of Religious Research* on this topic, confirms the presence of media bias against minority religions

and provides six related factors: (1) journalists' knowledge or familiarity with the subject matter, (2) the degree of cultural accommodation of the targeted religious group, (3) economic resources available to journalists, (4) time constraints of journalists, (5) journalists' sources of information, (6) the front-end/back-end disproportionally of reporting. Wright arrives at the key conclusion that the media are allies of anti-cult organizations. Richardson and van Driel (1997) use rather offensive rhetoric and blame the media for favoring the ideologically dominant status quo and discrediting differentiated groups. Hill, Hickman and McLendon (2001) argue that the media are much more critical of NRM than the established churches (Catholic, Protestant), they overemphasize their (often putative) violent nature, whereby they, to some extent and almost prophetically, impose such an image on these groups.

The defense of journalists based on natural attributes of journalism as a profession can be found in Silk (1997), Dart (1997) or Buddenbaum (1998).

Hoover and Clark (1997) suggest that media treatment of controversial religions is not simply a uniform conduit for the status quo, but a public forum for the playing out of a social drama as a group challenges a socially accepted norm to bring about change (Wright, 1997, p. 110).

### **Religious media audience**

The authors of *Religion and Mass Media: Audiences and Adaptations*, edited by Stout and Buddenbaum (1996) are regarded as pioneers of research into media content audience. Four empirical studies on the comparative use of media across Christian traditions explain how audience members respond to and then practice their religious directives. The authors conclude that regardless of institutional directives, media plays a very important role in the everyday lives of religious audiences.

Khojaste and Kalantari (2009) ask one of the key questions of the research into the relationship between religion and media: How can religious matters be addressed in the public media, so as to be able to involve a passive audience that is supposedly not the addressee of the message, and turn him or her into an active audience? They suggest that the answer can be found in the so-called religious media rituals.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The answer to our fundamental question rests on the application of the method of quantitative content analysis (Gunter, 2000, pp. 55–70), qualitative audience research methods based on focus groups (Hornig Priest, 1996, pp. 109–113) and the Delphi method (De Blasio et al., 2007, p. 122).

An analysis of the content will be conducted by the method of monitoring the frames (Contreras, 2007) and *topoi* (González Gaitano, 2008) on a sample of selected Slovak and Italian media. A part of the research is in development, and its aim is

to identify which groups of topics (frames), or commonly shared ideas (*topoi*) that are used in covering religious events in the individual types of media, and what the media is seeking to appeal to in the recipient's mind, and also, what can be learned to carry religious content through media more efficiently.

The focus groups were composed of both lay recipients and media experts within various groups across Slovakia. Results are based on how the respondents perceived the coverage of religious content in church and secular media, what they found missing or disturbing, where they saw a potential for improvement, and what causes they could identify.

This method has proven very useful during the qualitative research, where the researcher has not asked "what" or "how much," but "how" and "why." In our case, the objective of both research procedures was identical (to support this investigation), but it was approached from two different perspectives (focus groups "from outside," and Delphi groups "from within").

The above addresses the very basic structure of the research: the analysis of the mediated religious message and the system of transmission, i.e. the media communication itself. As per classical media theories, media communication comprises the source, channel, code, external input and the recipient.

The following passage presents the conclusions of the research of the communication channel based on group qualitative audience research using Delphi and focus group methods.

The Delphi method belongs to a sociological research method employed as part of the preliminary analyses. According to M. Sorice (2007, p. 122), the Delphi method was originally developed for technological and military purposes in the 1950s by Olaf Helmer and Norman Dalkey. Apart from the preliminary analyses — the originally planned area of application, this method was also used in other fields. As a result, several variants of this method have evolved. In general, this method is regarded as a tool, which can effectively contribute to finding solutions to complex problems. At the core of this method is the effort to initiate fruitful discussion within a group of experts, and, at the same time, eliminate potential interference among the individual members of the group.

Focus groups represent a favorite qualitative research method. As pointed by Gunter (2000, p. 46), its proponents argue that this method has "higher ecological validity" than a quantitative questionnaire or experiment-based methods. However, in our research, laypersons were given less room than experts since our main goal was to identify how the internal processes actually work and what are the causes behind them, rather than to gather information about the prevailing opinions of consumers. Thus, when setting up the focus groups, we focused on consumers representing that part of the continuum,<sup>1</sup> which corresponded to an active audience

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<sup>1</sup> Continuum is a media audience research concept by David Morley or Abercrombie and Longhurst. It represents a series of different types of audience depending on their passivity/activity

prepared to critically reflect upon the issues raised, or even actively contribute to the respective media content.

The focus groups were set up to include both experts and lay consumers. Since our primary goal was to enhance the “depth” of discussions, the total number of discussion groups was relatively small. As part of our research, we created ten discussion groups, most of them composed of experts (seven). As a complement, a smaller number of discussion groups (three) were formed from ordinary consumers.

When setting up focus groups we targeted recipients of media content familiarized with both secular and church media, especially those interested in religious messages. Therefore, we were looking for candidates from among the group of believers interested in current developments in media, during topically-oriented public events we organized in two Slovak towns, Nitra and Ružomberok, in February and March 2009. Young people formed a majority in two research groups, and the third group was mixed. The number of people in the groups ranged from three to fifteen.

The Delphi technique was applied to seven discussion groups of experts. The discussions were conducted from May 2008 to May 2009 in Slovakia (Bratislava, Ružomberok, Nitra), but also in the Czech Republic (Prague) and Italy (Rome). There were two research meetings held both in Nitra and Prague, with the attendance of journalists from various secular and church media engaged in the religious topics, academics active in journalism from the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Romania, Russia, and from other European countries, employees of the Catholic academic journalistic institutions from Europe, Asia, USA and Africa, experienced media experts cooperating with the Department of Journalism of the Philosophical Faculty at the Catholic University in Ružomberok, and those interested in the church media developments. The number of attendants of the discussion groups ranged from eight to twenty.

An identical set of questions was asked in both focus and expert groups — ordered and developed, based on specific circumstances and context. The key question was as to whether the media language is suitable for the transmission of religious messages. Other related questions were as follows:

- What is the relation of the secular media towards religious topics? What is the determining factor of their relation?
- What are the aims of journalism and religion?
- What instruments can be employed to attain such aims in journalism and religion?
- What values are at stake within journalism and religion?

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— from the most passive consumers accepting anything that is brought up — likened to a sack of potatoes sitting on a sofa in front of a TV — to more selective and critical types of audience with a stronger technical background, to the so-called petty producers, i.e. recipients who interactively enter the arena of media communication, and are able and willing to produce authentic media content. (Cf. Sorice, 2007).



- Is there a match between religious values and news values?
- Is this a question of professionalism?
- Is an evangelization medium a journalistic institution?
- Is it possible to reasonably inform the public about religious topics (and under what conditions)?
  - Is a full-scope evangelization through media possible?
  - How successful are evangelization media?
  - What are the weaknesses of the secular media in relation to religious messages?
  - What are the weaknesses of the church media in relation to professional journalism?
    - Is a shift in this area possible, and if yes, what are its limits?

The discussions were conducted in accordance with the rules applicable to individual methods. There were audio recordings and written records made during the discussions. The information obtained was subsequently made subject to interpretation. As part of the reduction of the obtained information we applied the method of summarization of meaning and the method of categorization (De Blasio, 2007, pp. 92–93). This means that we synthesized the key thoughts contained in the answers of the interviewed persons, and subsequently categorized them into specific topical areas. Then we looked for certain similarities or affinities within the individual areas, which could then be aggregated into distinct categories. We identified 34 such categories, which combined the individual features of the system of media communication in relation to the transmission of religious messages. These categories were then organized into several groups based on whether they pertained to the media language code, media communication code, or external inputs. Thus, we arrived at 12 categories related to the language code, 9 categories related to the transmission channel, and 13 categories related to external inputs.

Table 1. Categories related to the language code, to the transmission channel and to external inputs

	Code	Channel	External inputs
1.	News values	Function of journalism	Prejudice
2.	Conflict	Commerciality	Faith
3.	Scandal	Internal motivation	Communicators
4.	Entertainment, leisure	Technical conditions	Journalists' professionalism
5.	Fragmented and flashy nature	Democratic nature, public	Investment in people
6.	Stereotypes	Agenda setting	Strategy
7.	Story	Capacity to change people	Church control
8.	Generalisation and simplification	Promotion	Independence

9.	Transmission of essence	Church media specifics	Truth and dialogue
10.	Quality vs superficial	—	Authority
11.	Language	—	Stance
12.	Awareness about audience	—	Journalists' profile
13.	—	—	Inputs expected from the church

Each of the research methods used is qualitative in its nature, which means that the research procedure does not follow the traditional quantitative pattern: the formulation of hypotheses, verification of the hypotheses, description of status, and confirmation/falsification of the hypotheses. Our approach follows a different pattern: perception and understanding, description of status, and formulation of hypotheses (De Blasio, 2007, p. 49). Therefore, a substantial difference can be observed between these two approaches: while quantitative research leads to confirmation or falsification of the hypotheses, and, as a consequence, includes rather normative and self-confident conclusions, qualitative research on the other hand arrives at the point where quantitative research has begun, i.e. the formulation of the hypotheses. Thus, the conclusions of the qualitative research attempt to contribute to finding a solution to a given subject and they are formulated with much greater caution and responsiveness to new findings and impulses.

At the heart of our research was the endeavour to obtain the most authentic understanding or insight into the system of media communication of religious messages, or, stated differently, to conduct an ethnographic observation. The material presented herein represents the outcomes of this observation related to the media channel. Our presupposition here was that within the framework of the transmission of the religious message through the media communication channel, problems might ensue from different understandings of the basic function of journalism, commercial/profit-oriented nature of media institutions, internal motivations of media producers, acceptance of the democratic and public nature of journalism, willingness to apply agenda setting, and the confidence in the capacity of the media to change people.<sup>2</sup>

## THE FUNCTION OF JOURNALISM

When asked about the relationship between journalism and religion, many of the participants of our research discussions considered the function of journalism as the key issue. Quite often, they asserted that the primary goal of the media is to

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<sup>2</sup> The research outcome categories also include technical conditions, promotion and church media specifics. However, a detailed discussion of the technical conditions and promotion categories lies outside the scope of this study, since these categories are quite specific to the Slovak media environment.

make money, i.e. to entertain. Within the discussion groups (both lay and professional), the proponents of the profit function often found themselves in conflict with the proponents of the information function of journalism.

The consensus of present journalistic theories is that the main role of journalism is to inform. This means not just providing pure facts, but covering the topic. The task to influence people's minds is a serious one; therefore the authors — regardless of their ideological background — emphasize the commitment to responsibility and veracity. The Catholic media theorist J. Spuchl'ák (2000, p. 45) highlights the commitment to the truth and the good as the only guarantee of an undistorted mass medium. Marxists understand journalism as “a tool used in the fight for the class interests of the proletariat and a vehicle for the propaganda of the idea of revolution” (Darmo, 1991, p. 153). With reference to Aristotle's (1964a, 2a; 1964b, 1a) three functions of language — informative (*logos apophantikós*), pragmatic (*logos pragmatikós*) and poetic (*logos poetikós*) — one may conclude that propaganda, with its pragmatic function accentuated to the extreme, is in contradiction with the true nature of journalism. However, some religious communicators still think that the opposite is true — especially those who fail to grasp that apology, which is also a form of propaganda, cannot be referred to as journalism.

A complementary but still present phenomenon can be found in many articles that summarize entertainment as a function of journalism. Today, it seems the significance of entertainment increases at the expense of the information and evaluation functions. Although media theories are generally neutral on this issue and accept it as a fact, theorists from the church environment clearly articulate their negative view of entertainment in the media, or at least, the abundance thereof. T. Zasepa (2003, p. 30) even asserts that, to a certain extent, entertainment degrades the recipient, since it teaches him or her to consume the cheapest and lightest media products. As the primary objective of religious messages is not to draw attention, but to provide content, the role of entertainment is just instrumental.

However, the “triumphant march” of entertainment also affects the media, which focuses on mediating religious messages, and represents an almost intractable dilemma. Such media understand the shift from information to entertainment as a deviation from their true function; however, according to our respondents, in view of the requirements of the readers, they are literally “forced to resign themselves to providing the gist of information.” Participants in our research agree that this is something like a tax paid to current journalism and their statements also include phrases like a “tabloid road to hell.”

Since the principal function of journalism is to inform, i.e. to develop an image of reality, this requires responsibility, respect for the truth, and commitment to the good. This leads to N. González Gaitano's definition that the role of journalism is to inform and to make people better citizens.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Research interviews.

Today, such an elevated concept of the function of journalism has been attacked based on widely accepted views of journalism as a business. Those participants of our research who identified themselves with such views have also accepted a quite deeply rooted concept that the true function of journalism is to make profit. Some participants of the focus groups, even from among media experts, see the informative function of journalism as a lie. The question is: Is the primacy of the informative role of journalism only a smoke screen to cover up the true demiurges of the “fourth estate?”

Joining this wave would pose a serious risk as this would effectively disqualify us from the public discourse on anything connected with or related to the mission of journalism. Thus, those who see profit as the primary function of journalism confuse journalism as a vocation with the media as a business. Although the frame<sup>4</sup> of identifying mission with business activity is widely accepted, it can be accepted only as a source of inspiration for (self-)reflection, but not as a social change with an inherent potential to completely transform the original mission of journalism as such.

With respect to the mediation of religious messages via media channels, the role of the Church within the context of journalism also needs to be clarified. Its primary role is to preach the Gospel about the Kingdom of God. The aim of heralding the Gospel is to change the human heart and lean it toward God, the Creator. Paul VI (1975, p. art. 18) states in his apostolic exhortation that “the Church evangelizes when she seeks to convert, solely through the divine power of the message she proclaims, both the personal and collective consciences of people, the activities in which they engage, and the lives and concrete milieu which are theirs.”

It seems that the primary aim of journalism to uncover the true image of the world and to develop the goodness in man is in rare concordance with the Church's mission. The non-compliant elements injected into this relationship come from efforts to broadcast propaganda, entertain, or make profit. We provided evidence that propaganda is not journalism, entertainment only plays an instrumental role to attract attention, and profit is a function of media institutions, and thus should not be confused with the mission or vocation of journalism. With respect to the aspects outlined above, religious messages in the arena of journalism do not necessarily lead to a conflicting situation. The same, however, is not true about the interaction between the understanding and the performance of this function, which, indeed, may be subject to distortion.

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<sup>4</sup> Entman (2004, p. 5) defines framing as “selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution.” According to Entman (1993, pp. 51–58), frames have four functions. They define the terms of a problem, offer a causal interpretation, encapsulate a moral opinion on it and promise a solution, remedy or line of action.

## Commerciality

In our research, the commercial nature of media institutions emerges as an essential factor of the capacity of the media channel to carry a religious message. The view of secular media as commercial, and the church media as non-commercial, appears to be a commonly shared notion, including the view that the religious message as such is non-commercial, i.e. non-profit or loss-making in its nature. J. Kováčik (2009), spokesman of the Bishops' Conference of Slovakia even differentiates between three types of media: public service media, commercial media, and authentic media, which also includes the church media. According to Kováčik, authentic media are represented by non-profit media. This provides quite a significant indication of how the representatives of the church media understand the media as such.

J. Spuchlák (2009) explicitly states that the "chains of profit" restrain the watchdog of democracy. Unlike media restrained by profit, the "principle-based" media do not make profit, or, at most, they invest in their own development. Quite naturally, profit-oriented media opt for commercial messages as their language is well suited to their commercial purpose. "It's not that they are against the Church; they simply look for commercial topics," concludes J. Spuchlák.

The research participants also articulated several positive views of the commercial approach to journalism. The commercial approach, in their view, takes on the challenge to pursue a cause, has the ability to come up with quality coverage, delivers the message and positively affects the recipient. On the other hand, the non-commercial approach leads to passivity, underperformance, substandard professionalism, stiffness, and contentment at the expense of innovation. Since personal profit is the most effective form of motivation, the future of innovations and trend-setting in the mass media will remain with the commercial media.

## Internal motivation

The above reflections on the understanding of basic functions and commerciality of media lead to the following significant conclusions. The media in general are so-to-speak, inwardly oriented towards their own profit and development. The Church, however, with its mission, together with the church media, is, in fact, oriented outwards, i.e. toward the recipient, and the recipient's good and growth. While the basic movement identified in the media is directed inward, the basic movement in church media is directed outward (for both the religious message and church media).

However, the community of media theorists and practitioners widely accept the notion of "non-essentiality of essence" in the media. "The media are not here to discuss the essence," says Vlastimil Nečas (2009). Since this understanding of the role of the media is prevalent, it may be understood as a natural consequence of the underlying motive of the utilitarian function of the media, which overrides

anything that the media may produce. Once the media are reluctant to seek the essence of phenomena and limit themselves to the superficial gathering of news features with the primary focus on entertainment, their primary source of motivation will be to make use of the recipient as a consumer, or a particle of their target market — and take no regard of the recipient as a person.

On the other hand, the Church's presence in the media has always been characterized by a high regard for the dignity and good of a person. In line with this understanding, the participants of our research have asked the church media to cover areas ignored by commercial media, especially social issues such as unemployment, just profit, just wage and exploitation. As the participants themselves put it, the commitment to pursue the true needs of people so that they can live a better and fuller life is quite distant from the virtual reality of the media that introduces various pseudo-topics and pseudo-problems into society.

The internal motivation of the media — whether outward or inward — also translates into the internal motivation of their creative producers, i.e. the journalists. One of our respondents working for commercial TV said he was compelled by his conscience and a sense of obligation toward the viewers to cover some topics, to explain certain things, and to tell the truth. This was the case in a report about the effects of hormonal contraception, the main message of which was a piece of information that each form of hormonal contraception entails an abortive function as one of its effective levers. However, such a level of focus appears to be rather rare compared to the prevailing characteristics of journalists in general. Previous Slovakian sociological surveys have shown that the most valued virtue of journalists — as they perceive it — was flexibility of thinking, originality of ideas and the ability to relate to others (Brečka, 2006, pp. 41–43). Freedom in decisions and personal independence were regarded as the most significant factors of their profession (Brečka, 2006, p. 43), and as for motivation, the work itself and opportunity for self-assertion was the most important factor (Brečka, 2006, p. 51). Our survey substantiates these theses and leads us to the conclusion that people who work in the media — with a considerable risk of hyperbolized generalization — are egocentrics who pursue in the first place their own independence and self-assertion, and who think highly of their psychical performance and the ability to liaise with others and use them for their own purposes.

This means that higher requirements are placed on the personal qualities of religious communicators. It is therefore quite natural that religious communication in media will be more likely to fail, but at the same time, more likely to aim for the heights.

### **Democratic nature and publicity**

Publicity and general access of journalistic communicators to public information represent the key prerequisites of their work. Journalism exists because sociological

developments have led to disclosure and declassification of facts in order to make them publicly available and provide room for the publication of such information and their assessment by journalists.

How does the relationship between the openness of information and religious messages fit into this picture? Our survey points to quite a significant contradiction: common media recipients tended to address the Church's fear of bringing to light some issues, of listening to the other party, and of bringing both parties of a dispute to one table. On the other hand, experts among church communicators defended the need for caution and argued in favor of the exclusion. Here, the distrust and the related need for supervision have emerged as the primary causes of this phenomenon. The supervision is maintained through a hierarchical structure, which is quite natural for the Church. However, it appears much less natural in an external or public arena.

Church communicators find it essential to resolve the key problems and issues inside the Church in an internal forum — since, in the final analysis, that is where the actual decision is made before it is published. Such an approach requires absolute trust between the lower layers and upper layers of the hierarchy. Within the media arena, subordination is often enhanced by creating additional layers of relationships with different areas of work, e.g. appointing priests as managers in the church media, who are, simultaneously, subject to the authority of a bishop.

The general feeling in Slovakia is that there is a long-term need for more trust in laity in the media. This feeling was also substantiated by this research's outcome.

There is a consensus among the research participants, who were not just lay people — that our society sorely lacks a lay institution with the authority to effectively influence public debate. “Bishops distance themselves from the laity — and this is a specifically Slovak issue” is a common thought of several contributors.

The church's approach to media communication is marked by a deep-seated distrust of communicators who do not have a direct mandate granted by the hierarchy. They express concerns that unresolved internal affairs might “spill over” to the public arena. As J. Kováčik, the spokesperson of the Slovak Bishops' Conference put it during our research, any internal issue should be resolved between the priest and the bishop, and the public and believers should obtain the information by communicating with the priests in the parish. Such a hierarchical ideal, however, ignores the current forms of public control and the intensity of public interest. In practice, it is very challenging to employ the hierarchical form of communication carefully and effectively enough to avoid misunderstandings, negative emotions and subsequent activities that disrupt the hierarchical communication ideal.

One result of these concerns within the church environment is the reality of censorship of topics, names, and forms of coverage. Professional participants in our research colloquiums who worked in the church media have arrived at a consensus that there exists an embargo on certain topics and certain people in the church media. “When I want to invite four people to a discussion, what I really need to do

is invite eight people so that half of them get through,” says an editor of the Catholic station *TV LUX*. “We are complaining that a priest or a believer is not provided with adequate room in the secular media, but the embargo present in the church media is even tougher,” concludes an editor of an economic weekly.

Democratic and public nature is the key feature of the media channel. However, the religious messages come from an environment with a completely different internal structure. A preference for the hierarchical communication model is therefore harmful in a non-ideal environment and our research requires we reassess this approach with respect to the currently employed communication vehicles and methods.

### **Agenda setting**

The media channel is naturally attracted to so-called agenda setting, since it has the power to influence what is debated in the public arena, what is generally felt as important, and what is not discussed or marginalized. In that respect, our research shows several interesting aspects to the nature of religious messages and the behaviour of religious communicators.

The key outcome of our research discussions is that religious communicators do not seem to be interested in making use of this feature of the media channel. On the contrary, they tend to think that their role is to reflect upon the topics introduced by others. Such an approach results in a tendency not to react to topics, which religious communicators suggest should not be regarded as relevant. “Staying quiet is also a reaction,” says the Head of the Secretariat of *Katolícke noviny* (national Catholic weekly). In our research, however, this tactic was received with considerable discontent by professionals as well as other participants. It is generally viewed as overused, and, what is more, not a part of a strategic plan, but rather a sign of an inability to come up with a competent reaction.

The respondents identified several causes, the most significant of which is poorly staffed church media. The agenda setting requires strong personalities with journalistic enthusiasm and much professionalism and experience. Other factors that caught the church media unprepared to embrace agenda setting ensue from the very nature of the media — their scope of coverage, influence on society, target groups, and image, as well as a quite complicated management structure of church media, where the consensus on the specific agenda would need to comprise a too broad group of people.

Nevertheless, based on our research, there is a strong need for agenda setting. In particular, the topics should include moral excesses in politics and business, management ethics, the adequacy of profit, economic crisis, lay-offs, exploitation and other forms of social injustice. These topics represent a “vacuum” in media coverage and a challenge for communicators who seek the true good of man. “Since the ‘Son of God took on flesh and saved us’ (a key Christian message) is not regarded as a piece



of news by the media, it needs to be replaced with the news about a bishops' initiative on the dignity of the human person, e.g. in a hypermarket open 24 hours a day," stated one of the focus group participants. The need to implement a strategy and develop a subsequent focused campaign is one of the key outcomes of this research.

### **The capacity to change people**

The question of the capacity of the media to change people — not only their opinions, but also their key attitudes and hierarchy of goods — is one of the most controversial questions among both media theorists and practitioners. Opinions vary from a complete rejection to an emphasis on the role of the media in this area.

Twenty years after the collapse of communism the International European Conference on the State of Media in Prague<sup>5</sup> more or less reached a general consensus that a strong line needs to be drawn between media communication and communication of the essence of phenomena. At the conference, Jiří Kraus discussed the question of a metaphor, i.e. *topos*, a commonly shared idea, or a common wave length, which facilitates the actual transfer of a message by the communicator, and which creates a dialogue. According to Kraus, the metaphor, so typical of media communication, now becomes increasingly detached from the essence of its existence — it becomes just a tool. Thus, if media communicators fail to "meet" their recipients on the plane of "essence," they simply cannot work up to a form of communication with the intensity and depth which could lead to internal transformation.

Here, one cannot overlook a completely opposing objective of church communication, which is to change persons and "convert" them. The four principles of Michał Drożdż (2009) of evangelization through media also include "change of thinking." Thus, he can be viewed as an advocate of the idea of religious formation through the media. A similar understanding of the effects of religious messages in the media can be observed in lay media consumers or involved propagators of religious messages who do not have direct experience of media work. The dominant view of media practitioners was formulated by the Director of *TV LUX*, Marek Poláček (2009): "Media do not change people or their lives; they can only give an impulse for a change." Poláček himself was steered to journalism from his original intention to work with the Roma people at the instigation of the Salesian missionary, Fr. Augustín Vrecko. "He convinced me to study journalism, because we need to 'change the Slovak's heads.'" However, experience later led M. Poláček to a more cautious stance. "Religious action through media is just a preliminary preparation of the soil for the work of the Holy Spirit," said the editor of *Katolícké noviny*.

It seems that the media have the capacity to change people's opinions, but not their life attitudes, their relationship with God, or the basic values and moral rules

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<sup>5</sup> The International Scientific Conference "Media 20 Years after," Prague: Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University in Prague, 2009.

imprinted in human nature. In this area, the work of the media is limited to encouragement, motivation and inspiration.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

In our analysis of the inherent features of media communication channels relative to the transmission of religious messages through the media, we have successfully identified several sources of tension. The reasons for such tensions reside in the essential discrepancy between the media and religious communication; naturally, religious messages bring some of these tensions into their non-native environment.

We are faced with the following two diametrically opposed interpretations of the function of journalism: the idealistic view focusing on information — and the pragmatic view, focusing on profit. This, however, is a serious misunderstanding of the definition of journalism, because it confuses the vocation of journalism with business. Therefore, it is important to sharply discern the terms, and prevent profit-making from being instilled into our understanding of the true nature of journalism. Therefore, we may substantiate the classical notion that the function of journalism is to inform and make people better citizens. Such understanding of journalism does not contradict its capacity to carry religious messages, but at the same time, it does contradict the above incorrect interpretation and practical implications thereof (propaganda, entertainment, profit).

Notwithstanding the aforementioned, the commerciality of media channels needs to be accepted, since the answer does not depend solely on that function of journalism, but also on the function of the medium as an institution. Unlike a religious message — which is, quite clearly, non-commercial or even anti-commercial and non-profit in its nature — the commerciality of media is natural and inevitable. This also means that conveying the message in an adequate quality and in an attractive and appealing (media-friendly) form also requires other than commercially motivated factors, and these appear more sophisticated than mere personal benefit. Therefore, one of the challenges of the mediation of religious messages through media is the ability to adequately “slacken the reins” of commerciality.

The commercial focus is closely related to the internal motivation of media institutions and its employees in their liaison with recipients, which was defined above as “inward-oriented:” good is what brings money or other benefit (power) to the medium. On the other hand, the “outward” motivation is encoded in a religious message because the mission of the Church is to pursue the good of man. Despite such a striking difference in motivation, the aim remains the same: to draw the attention of the recipient. Altruistic motivation, however, remains more demanding because of the personal qualities and maturity of the communicators; thus, they are more prone to failure. This may be viewed as a key to understanding the relationship between religion and media.

With respect to the presence of religious messages in the media, the democratic and public nature of journalism has also proven beneficial. Here, the problem is that there is a significant discrepancy between the structure of the transmission channel and the structure of the church environment as a source of a religious message. We have identified two basic areas of tension: the “spill-over” of the church hierarchical order in media communication and the fear of the Church of losing control over the media message. However, trying to press a “non-native” ideal system into an inversely structured media environment is harmful to both communication and its effect. The solution therefore lies in overcoming concerns about the structure of media and learning to use it for the benefit of the religious message.

Agenda setting is a significant feature of the media communication channel. The communicators’ views on this issue fall into two opposing groups: rejection of engaging in agenda setting and calls for a more strategic engagement through campaigns aimed at the good of the whole society regardless of individual attitudes on religion. Based on our research, the former approach can be viewed as non-journalistic and sometimes also associated not only with a deliberate intention, but also with incapacity to competently engage in agenda setting. Thus, making better use of the potential of agenda setting remains a challenge for religious communicators.

Can a religious message mediated through the communication channel change its recipient? “Definitely no” is the answer of media communicators; “definitely yes” accompanied by high expectations is the answer of those without direct experience in media work, but eager to change the world around them. Our research has shown a rare harmony of secular and religious communicators on the view that media cannot form, but only encourage or inspire (i.e. they can change only opinions, not value-related attitudes). However, several discrepancies can be observed here as well; whereas secular communicators are not interested in targeting other than opinion-related elements, religious communicators seek the funding for their efforts in the inspiring power of their message.

Such a difference, however, does not impede cooperation between the Church and media. Our research has shown that there exist no fundamental impediments within the media communication channel to the transmission of religious messages. All identified and described frictions are more or less professional deficiencies, and they represent challenges (faced by either secular media, or religious communicators, or both) to improve and step up their efforts. Thus, it can be concluded that fundamental differences between the original and medially processed religious message are not inevitable. The research hypothesis was thereby not confirmed. Religious messages can be transmitted through the media communication channel insofar as communicators take actions expressive of good will and put in their effort.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> This conclusion does not apply to the evangelization in media, which, for the purpose hereof, is regarded as a specific type of religious message; due to the complexity of the subject it is not addressed in this paper.

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Terézia Rončáková

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