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## Chapter 3

# Understanding Media Dynamics

**Abstract:** Mass media and social media afford a communicative environment providing a horizon of orientation for citizens about conflicts relating to religion, and provide social actors with the tools to engage in such conflicts. Media may insert various dynamics into conflicts and may occasionally become actors themselves in contestations over religious issues. This chapter applies a typology that distinguishes among three different media dynamics: (1) media's ability to *amplify* the communication and the ramifications of the reported events, (2) how the world is represented, *framed*, in the media, and the ways in which the media bestow the communication of events with a certain narrative and dramaturgy and work as arenas for the *performative agency* of various involved actors, and (3) the various ways in which media as social and communicative environments come to *co-structure* communication and actions. The terror attack on the French satire magazine *Charlie Hebdo* is used as an illustrative example.

**Keywords:** media dynamics, framing, mediatization, mediatization of religion, *Charlie Hebdo*

In this chapter, we will provide a conceptual framework for understanding the active interplay between media, religion and society, with a special emphasis on the various media dynamics that come into play during social and cultural conflicts involving religion. The framework will also serve as a reference for the subsequent chapters' analyses of conflicts in mediatized religious environments.

## 3.1 Heated Debates

In March 2016, the Danish public service broadcaster TV2 aired a series of three documentary programs with the title *Mosques Behind the Veil*. Through the use of hidden camera and actors working undercover pretending to be Muslims who were seeking guidance from imams in eight different mosques, the documentary revealed that the advice given by some of the imams was in sharp contrast to existing Danish laws and norms: In some of the mosques, they were taught about Islamic rules for stoning and whipping, were encouraged to punish their

children physically if they did not pray, and a woman was advised to stay with her violent husband and learned she could not deny him having sex with her. The documentary series spurred wide attention and discussion in other media about the problems of a ‘parallel society’ that is governed by religious rules and the series was the immediate cause of a political initiative to stop ‘hate preachers’ as these imams became labelled in the political agreement between a majority of the Danish political parties (Kirkeministeriet 2016).

The documentary series also met with severe criticism. Representatives of Muslim organizations and mosques accused TV2 of presenting a very biased picture of the practices of imams in Denmark, and for destroying years of work by the mosques in support of integration in Denmark (Westersø 2016). However, criticism also came from other quarters. The Danish talk radio station Radio24-syv examined parts of the raw tape recordings and criticized TV2 for deliberately producing a much more one-sided picture of the imams’ practices than the actual material had provided evidence for (Graversen 2016). When the documentary, a year later, was nominated for the prestigious award for Danish journalism, the Cavling Prize, it again met with severe criticism, this time from four university researchers. In a lengthy newspaper article, Suhr et al. (2017) raised eight questions to TV2 challenging the television station’s account of the apparent misconduct of the imams in the mosques, for instance its use of undercover agents. In its present form, the researchers argued, the documentary was ‘very one-sided and in several instances it directly misrepresented the circumstances’. Television documentaries using hidden camera and microphones have also created discussions about Islam in other Scandinavian countries, for instance, the documentary *The State of the Nation (Rikets tilstand)* from 2000, made by Norwegian TV2, about the circumcision of Muslim women in Norway, and the Swedish *Mission Investigation (Uppdrag granskning)* from 2012, made by SVT, about Swedish imams’ advice to women about male suppression.

These cases not only bear witness to the heated public debates about Islam in Scandinavian countries, but also illustrate how various media are implicated, not only in reporting about these issues, but also in the very development of conflicts about religion. Danish TV2 not only tried to influence the public agenda, but also paved the way for political action, including new legislation that narrowed the freedom of speech for all religious actors and caused a change in public administrative and financial procedures regarding religious institutions. Media occasionally become active participants in such conflicts, for instance, by pursuing a particular agenda and by becoming the target of severe criticism. In short, the role of the media in the domain of religion has become a frequent public issue in itself, in this case, TV2’s representation of reality became an important part of the dispute about Islam.

## 3.2 The Mediatization of Religion

The integral role of media in the interactions between religious actors and organizations and the wider culture and society has been subject to theoretical considerations within the framework of mediatization theory. Generally speaking, mediatization, as a concept, denotes the ‘long-term interrelation processes between media change on the one hand and social and cultural change on the other’ (Hepp, Hjarvard, and Lundby 2010, 223). Applying this framework to the institutional domain of religion, the mediatization of religion denotes the processes ‘through which religious beliefs, agency, and symbols are becoming influenced by the workings of various media’ (Hjarvard 2016, 8). Such changes take place at both a structural level, i.e. the interdependencies between institutional domains, such as religion, politics, and the media, and at the level of social interaction, i.e. the practices of individuals and organizations. For a series of studies on the mediatization of religion in the Nordic countries, see Hjarvard and Lövheim (2012).

In his study of historical mediatization processes in relation to the Protestant Church of Norway, Lundby points out that it still enjoyed a relatively autonomous position in the early 1970s, and also that *vis-à-vis* the public service broadcaster NRK, ‘there was still such a respect in NRK towards the Christian tradition carried by the Church of Norway that very little media-adapted editing was applied to “religious programmes”’ (Lundby 2016, 32). Gradually, the various Norwegian media, including NRK, acquired a more professional and independent stance towards religion, as well as towards other societal institutions, such as politics, and increasingly actors in the church and politics became dependent on the media as a resource for communicating with their constituencies. Following this, various media became an important source of information for the general population about religious issues, and public discussions about religious issues were increasingly influenced by the agenda of the news media, and only to a lesser extent the agenda of religious institutions. In order to gain public attention through the news media, religious issues should fit the media’s news values, and frequently religion became an issue when religious communities appeared to be out of sync with the values of secular society, for instance, in relation to gender, sexual orientation, freedom of speech, etc. (Christensen 2012; Hjarvard 2013).

The proliferation of the Internet and various forms of portable, interactive, and online media, such as mobile phones and tablets, and the subsequent spread of social network media, such as Facebook and Twitter, have intensified and altered the media’s influence. The traditional mass media have been suppl-

mented by networked forms of communication that allow individuals and groups to engage with each other more directly. This has changed the conditions for social interaction: it has allowed official representatives of various religious communities (pastors, imams, etc.) to engage more directly with both their followers and the wider public, but it has also provided a new communications infrastructure giving the authority to both ordinary people and media celebrities to voice opinions about religion independently of traditional religious authorities (Clark 2011). The new media landscape has also altered the conditions for the public's engagement in political and religious conflicts. In their study of the role of various forms of digital media for mobilizing protest (for instance, the Occupy Movement) Bennett and Segerberg (2013) distinguish between collective action and connective action. The former concerns the traditional kind of protests organized by high-resource organizations, such as political parties and interest organizations. Connective action is, to a much lesser extent, or not at all, underpinned by formal organizations, and relies instead on crowd enabled networks of likeminded individuals who use various digital media to organize and communicate their protests.

Although social network media allow for individual and personal engagement, they also operate by collective and institutional logics. Dijck and Poell (2013) point to programmability, popularity, connectivity, and datafication as underlying logics, i.e. the norms, strategies, mechanisms, and economies of social network media that co-structure the interactions between people in them. In this way, social interaction becomes a hybrid social and technological phenomenon. The structuring influence of social network media on social interaction and opinion formation is reflected in the emergence of communicative 'filter bubbles' (Pariser 2011) and network patterns of 'polarized crowds' (Smith et al. 2014). We will return to such implications of the social network media for opinion formation and for citizens' willingness to discuss controversial issues, but first we need to specify some general media dynamics that are at play during various forms of conflict.

### 3.3 A Typology of Media Dynamics

In what follows, we will use mediatization theory as our point of departure from which to understand the influence of various media dynamics in social and cultural conflicts involving religion (Eskjær, Hjarvard and Mortensen 2015; see also Driessen et al. 2017). By using the word 'influences' in relation to the media we are explicitly avoiding the term 'media effects', i.e. the idea that media, at the level of individual messages, may have a definitive influence on audiences' opin-

ion and behaviour. This may be the case under specific circumstances, but this is not our point of interest here. Our perspective is not primarily a question of dissemination, of spreading the ‘message’ but rather how the media environment conditions religious activity and influences religious representations. Our claim is at once more modest and more comprehensive. More modest, because we will not posit that media may have a determining influence on the outcome of social interaction, including opinion formation or the escalation or downscaling of conflicts. More comprehensive, because we locate the level of influence at a structural level, i.e. the mediatized social environment and the conditions it sets for human agency.

From the perspective of mediatization theory, the question about the influence of media on social interaction may more aptly be described as the ways in which the integration and presence of media in social and cultural domains come to condition, but not determine, the encounters between actors in everyday life. Media have been institutionalized in different contexts as resources of interaction. From the point of view of the individual actor, a person or organization, the media are the available tools that enable, limit, and structure communicative interaction in various ways. These conditions will certainly vary according to the media and social context in question, but at a more general level, we will in what follows suggest that these conditions insert certain dynamics into the way in which social interaction come to be spelled out, in our case, in relation to conflicts involving religion. These dynamics are, conceptually speaking, positioned at the intersection between mediatization and mediation processes. The dynamics are a result of the mediatized conditions, the institutional interdependencies between media, religion, and society, but they concern the way in which actual communicative interactions are performed and come to have a bearing on, for instance, political and religious affairs.

Following Hjarvard, Mortensen, and Eskjær (2015) we may discern three different media dynamics: (1) amplification, (2) framing and performative agency, and (3) co-structuring. This typology is inspired by a distinction by Meyrowitz (1993) on different metaphors of the media, each focusing on different aspects of their workings: (1) Considering the media as conduits draws our attention to the media’s ability to influence the magnitude of communicative interactions; (2) looking at the media as languages addresses the media’s formatting of meaning during conflicts; (3) and considering the media as an environment focuses our attention on the structural influences of the media environment, for instance, as regards access to communicative resources (see Table 3.1). In order to further specify the three dynamics, we will use the terror attack on the French satire magazine *Charlie Hebdo* as an illustrative example, since this major and tragic event encompassed all of these dynamics and may be more familiar to in-

ternational readers than a national event in one of the Scandinavian countries. The case of *Charlie Hebdo* also contextualizes this book within a wider European setting.

**Table 3.1** The influences of media dynamics in mediatized conflicts.

Media metaphor	Dynamics	Influence
Media as conduits	Amplification	Volume, speed, reach, level of involvement
Media as language	Framing and performative agency	Representation, performance, and dramaturgy
Media as environment	Co-structuring	Media practices both embedded in, and constitutive of, structural relations of power

Source: Hjarvard, Mortensen, and Eskjær (2015, 10)

### 3.4 Amplification

If we look at the media as conduits or channels of communication, an important dynamic of the media is their ability to *amplify* not only communication, but also the ramifications of the reported events. As such, it concerns the volume, speed, and reach of communication and the subsequent level of involvement by people. The violent attack on *Charlie Hebdo*'s editorial offices in Paris by two radical Islamists on 7 January 2015, clearly demonstrates this dynamic. The attack immediately became breaking news on a global scale. The subsequent police hunt for the perpetrators and the additional attack, and hostage crisis in a Jewish supermarket in Paris, were followed intensely by news media and on the social media in many countries, and the extremely high media attention helped to mobilize worldwide demonstrations to protest against terrorism and in support of *Charlie Hebdo* and free speech.

The target of the attack, the magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, also helped to amplify the event and the controversy: The first issue of *Charlie Hebdo* after the attack had a drawing of the Prophet Muhammad on the front page posing with a sign that said 'I am Charlie'. The magazine usually prints each issue in 60,000 copies, but this issue was printed in 7 million copies and it was distributed to numerous countries and translated into several languages (Stelter 2015). The worldwide attention to these happenings also created counter reactions to the Western media's reporting, in particular in the Arab and Muslim world. Here,

the media coverage, demonstrations, and various political reactions, did not all follow the Western media's framing of the controversy as a question of terrorism, and in Turkey and Egypt authorities took various measures to ban and limit the distribution of the *Charlie Hebdo* drawing and of articles concerning the matter, in order to de-escalate the conflict within their countries, but they were only partly successful in this (Moore 2015; YaLibnan 2015). The global spread of the news of the happening re-contextualized the conflict and gave it many more interpretations. In the Philippines, for instance, Muslim demonstrators focused on *Charlie Hebdo* as the perpetrator due to its new depiction of the Prophet Muhammad on the cover of the magazine (Agence France-Presse 2015).

### 3.5 Framing and Performative Agency

The second media dynamic reflects the fact that the media are not neutral vehicles of information exchange, but involve a particular construction of the message in terms of meaning and aesthetics. In a metaphorical sense, the media are also languages through which the world is represented, *framed*, in particular ways at the same time as the media bestow the communication of events with a certain narrative and dramaturgy, and also work as arenas for the performative agency of various involved actors. In the case of the *Charlie Hebdo* attack, the Western news media almost unanimously framed the incident as a terrorist act against the freedom of expression, clearly supporting the official responses, not least, of Western-oriented governments. This framing of the attacks was, in a sense, over-determined by a series of existing and overarching frames that were developed in relation to similar attacks on freedom of speech, such as the death threats against the author Salman Rushdie, and the cartoonists of *Jyllands-Posten's* Muhammad drawings.

'Framing', as a concept, has both psychological and sociological meanings, including cognitive, social, and normative dimensions. Within media studies Entman's (1993) definition of framing highlights the selection of aspects of a perceived reality and the salience these aspects are given; through these acts of selection and salience-giving, media come to promote a 'particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation' (ibid. 52). Following this perspective, we should not only pay attention to the manifest textual frames, but we must also consider 'framing' as sense-making processes that involve discursive struggles between competing frames, of which some may have a dominant position. As reflected in several of the studies in this book, the discursive couplings between 'terrorism' and 'Islam' seem to be

a dominant aspect of the ‘problem definition’ in relation to Islam across classroom settings, the news media, and social network media.

The various Western mass media were not only framing the *Charlie Hebdo* attack in particular ways, but were also actors in the conflict. As media, they aligned themselves with the magazine under attack and its defence of freedom of speech. On the day after the attack on *Charlie Hebdo*, many European newspapers had removed all traditional news coverage in favour of a more artistic statement expressing their contempt for the perpetrators and their support for free speech. Newspapers became demonstrators. The perpetrators also tried to use the mass media as a platform from which to express their own cause. Similarly to other terrorist attacks, it did not just aim to cause damage and fear among particular people, but also served to maximize media attention; as a terrorist act it also had a performative dimension, exploiting the mediatized condition of contemporary society (Cui and Rothenbuhler 2017). During the subsequent hostage crises in France, two of the terrorists phoned the French radio station BFM RMC to present their side of the story to a wider audience. The social network media also helped to dramatize the events. Not least during the police hunt after the perpetrators, social network media became not only the forums for discussion and the expression of feelings, but also tools for people who were trying to contribute to the hunt by collecting information about the perpetrators’ whereabouts. Framing and performative agency are intertwined with each other. Using the media to perform in a particular way conveys the framing of the message with a certain authority. When a significant number of state leaders marched arm in arm in Paris in protest against the *Charlie Hebdo* attack, they were not only performing an act of protest that was reported by the news media, they were also giving authority to their own framing of the events, including their treatment recommendations, i.e. the policies to fight terrorism.

### 3.6 Co-Structuring

If we finally look at the media as social and communicative environments we can discern various ways in which media come to *co-structure* communication and actions. As mentioned above, the media may be understood as resources for interaction, but media resources are not evenly distributed though they are embedded within power relationships. The ability to influence the agenda of news media thus depends on your prominence as a news source, and, as many studies have demonstrated, political elites and other power holders in society typically have much easier access to the news media if compared to other sources. These power relationships are, for instance, conceptualized in the elite-driven media

theory (Hallin 1986), and this may, in the present case, explain why the mainstream press in Europe was very strongly aligned with the mainstream political parties. These power relationships are, however, not set in stone, but may – depending on the specific circumstances and context – be challenged and circumvented by stakeholders who can acquire new legitimacy as sources. In the case of the magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, before the terrorist attack it had been considered a somewhat marginal and radical voice in the French media landscape, but because of the attack and the existing discursive fault lines around immigration and Islam, it emerged overnight as a privileged voice and a unifying symbol of French and European political forces that were rallying for freedom of speech, and for democracy in general.

If the mainstream journalistic media presented a rather unified voice during this conflict, other media allowed for a larger diversity of reactions to be heard. Internet-based blogs, websites and social network media, such as Twitter and Facebook, made it possible for laymen and less professional stakeholders to engage with the conflict. A variety of Muslim voices were heard on social network media, not only those expressing condemnation of the attack, but also those questioning why they, as Muslims, were expected to voice a particular excuse for such atrocities in which they had had no part. The structuring influence on who gets to have a voice was also spelled out through legal means. The French authorities were not at all happy with their level of information control during the hunt for the perpetrators. The declaration of martial law was a means with which to enforce their ability to also manage information flows.

### 3.7 Social Network Media, Participation, and Contentious Issues

Above we have tried to sketch out how the mediatized conditions of contemporary society introduce three general dynamics into the ways conflicts are spelled out. In addition to such general dynamics, we may also discern more specific patterns of influences from media. Recently, several studies in the USA (Hampton et al. 2014), Denmark (Kulturstyrelsen 2015), and Norway (Fladmoe and Steen-Johansen 2017) have examined how social network media may influence the ways that users engage with controversial issues in such media. These studies are methodologically fairly similar and provide empirical evidence for the existence of a ‘spiral of silence’ in relation to social network media. The ‘spiral of silence’ is a middle-range theory that was developed by Noelle-Neumann (1984), which suggested that citizens’ willingness to participate in debates about contro-

versial issues depends on their perception of the extent to which others share their opinion on the issue. If an individual person perceives her own argument to be in the minority, she will be less inclined to discuss the issue openly with others, and vice versa. At an aggregate level this implies that people sharing this perceived minority position will engage less in discussions and thereby their position will, overall, appear to be even more marginal. In this way, a spiral of silence is gradually making majority positions more pronounced and minority positions less pronounced. People perceiving themselves to be in the minority do not necessarily change their opinion on an issue, but they abstain from letting their voice be heard, and thus their argument will not carry weight in the debate.

The abovementioned studies examine citizens' willingness to use social network media for debate about controversial issues, as opposed to other contexts of communication, such as discussions in private at the dinner table, attending public meetings, and in public media. The controversial issues used as test examples differ in topic: the US study poses questions about Edward Snowden's revelation of national security information (Hampton et al. 2014), the Danish study concerns Denmark's participation in military warfare in foreign countries (Kulturstyrelsen 2015), and the Norwegian study uses the publishing of religious cartoons as its test case (Fladmoe and Steen-Johansen 2017). All three studies confirm that fewer citizens would prefer to discuss such controversial issues on the social network media, while they would be much more inclined to discuss them in more private and intimate settings. This is confirmed in our own survey from 2015. More than 1 in 4 Scandinavians said that they discuss news on religious extremism daily or weekly (see Chapter 2). This primarily takes place in closed circles, e.g. at home and with friends, as shown in Table 3.2.

An important factor is the extent to which people can anticipate whether or not their audience or co-discussants share their opinion on an issue. In private settings, citizens usually perceive other participants to have more similar views and they are more sure about other participants' viewpoints, i.e. the level of uncertainty about others' arguments is lower. The US and Danish studies also suggest that a higher level of uncertainty about others' opinions, not only perceptions of a majority against one's own viewpoint, may constrain participation in debates. The Norwegian study, furthermore, points to the fact that the general willingness to participate in such debates on social network media resembles the situation in relation to other public media, such as newspapers, radio, and television.

**Table 3.2** In which contexts have you discussed news on religious extremism in the last 12 months? Percentages. From CoMRel survey, April 2015.

	Denmark	Norway	Sweden
At home with the family	66%	69%	63%
With friends	73%	70%	69%
At work or at school	49%	54%	51%
On social media (e.g. Facebook or Twitter)	9%	8%	9%
In the commentary fields of net newspapers, or in net discussion forums	2%	3%	4%
In church or other religious meeting places	3%	3%	3%
In cafés or similar locations	8%	13%	5%
N	816	953	857

Base: All of the respondents who had discussed news on religious extremism during the year before they were interviewed.

Social network media have been mentioned as possible venues for ordinary citizens' discussions about public issues in contrast to mass media's debates, which are often criticized for being populated by elite voices. It seems, however, that social network media, in practice, are not such a democratic venue for discussions about controversial issues. Social network media may allow for more voices to be heard, but they may – similarly to mass media – be prone to various dynamics that inhibit many people from debating controversial issues and that may reinforce the already existing divides between minorities and majorities, creating 'filter bubbles', etc. Perhaps a final lesson to be learned from these studies is that we cannot take the opinions articulated on the social network media as being representative of general public opinion, particularly not when it comes to controversial issues. The often fierce debates on social network media are not necessarily one of the voices of an otherwise silent majority, since many people abstain from taking part in debates here. Social network media may amplify certain viewpoints, but it is exactly the amplification of a particular framing of an issue that may cause other people to refrain from offering counterframings.

### 3.8 Media Dynamics and Human Agency

As demonstrated in this chapter, media may insert various dynamics into conflicts and media may themselves sometimes become actors in contestations over religious issues. In these ways, media may condition conflicts about religious issues, but they neither determine the particular framings of the conflicts nor the outcomes. Instead, the media afford a communicative environment that provides an important horizon of orientation for citizens about these conflicts and provides partisan social actors with the tools to engage in such conflicts in order to push the public agenda in directions that are suitable to their standpoints, politically, religiously, or otherwise. As the following studies in this book also demonstrate, human actors are not just subject to the mediatized conditions of conflicts, but are, to some extent, also knowledgeable about the various media dynamics conditioning the framing of issues and the construction of public attention. This human reflexivity about the role of media has made the media into a kind of meta-issue in many conflicts: The very representation of religion in various media, the mass media as well as the social network media, has become a regular, sometimes even a dominant aspect of such conflicts. To engage with contentious issues in the public realm involves not only the use of media, but increasingly also an awareness of the various media dynamics that amplify or silence particular voices, that frame issues in particular ways, and that invest conflicts with a particular dramaturgy.

In conclusion: The framework on mediatized conflicts laid out above will prove useful and relevant in forthcoming chapters. Contested religion in media dynamics of cultural conflicts in Scandinavia could well be studied through media's amplification, their framing and performative agency, and through the co-structuring of communication and actions through the social environment.

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