Original Article

Religious Messages and the Media Code - Inherent features of the media language code and the transmission of religious messages[1]

Terézia Rončáková
Catholic University in Ružomberok, Faculty of Arts and Letters, Department of Journalism, SLOVAKIA

Abstract: The purpose of this study is to determine whether the media language code is suitable for transmitting religious messages. In religious media communication one observes a tendency not to respect the classical *news values*, and in fact tends to limit them. This approach makes religious media communication fail at the start. Using textual analysis and qualitative research techniques, e.g., *focus groups* and *Delphi,* we investigate some *news values* relate (positively or negatively) to the religious messages. Here we present three most expressive of them: conflict, scandalousness and story. If messages are formed by *news values*, then religious messages are formed by means of values that we named the *gospel values,* and can be identified with traditional Catholic Church virtues. Finding possible connections between the *news values* and the *gospel values* seems to be one of the basic solutions for the religious message media coding.

Keywords: Media; religion; language; code; news values; gospel values

Introduction

Can media language carry religious content? This fundamental question has been the subject of our wide research inspired by previous projects carried out at the Department 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 the 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 communication code in media transmission of religious messages, the question subject to examination is how the inherent qualities of a media communication code affect the transmission of religious messages, on one hand, and how do such religious messages cope with the inherent qualities of media communication codes when transmitted through these communication channels.

In our examination of the capacity of media language code to transmit religious[2] messages, we will focus on the communication process, or, the communication process of mass media in particular. The generally accepted scheme transmitter – code – channel – noise – recipient is present in each communication process. As part of our research of the media code, which forms the basis of our further investigation, we have focused on the transmission part of the scheme, i. e. the code – channel – noise, in particular, and here, we have arrived at several key findings about the code, which are presented below.

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 the 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 relation between religion and media date back to the 1980s. A relatively small circle of scholars who explored the subject have managed to establish several specialised 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 *University of Amsterdam*, or *Centre for Media, Religion and Culture* at *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 to the conference have established a common scientific association led by Stewart M. Hoover from *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 *University of Colorado* in Boulder, the organising entity of the conferences.

Three interesting collective works have been published so far from the conferences: *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture* (eds. Stewart M. Hoover and Knut Lundby, 1997),

Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media (eds. Stewart M. Hoover and Lynn Schofield Clark, 1997) and *Mediating Religion: Studies in Media, Religion, and Culture* (eds. Jolyon Mitchell and Sophia Marriage, 2003).

Classification

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

1. proliferation of mediated religion (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 and 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 media
   b) religion as media
2) media criticism
   a) relation between sacred and profane
   b) anti-religious prejudice in media
   c) media approach to new religious movements
3) religious media audience.

Religious Impact of Media

Khojaste and Kalantari (2009) dealt with the philosophical account of the relation between religion and media and distinguished two opposite media approaches: instrumentalist approach (positive: media can be used) and essentialist approach (negative: there is an abyss between 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 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 a Moors (2006) present the idea of the 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) analysed the communication strategies of Christian fundamentalists in India and emphasised 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 materialised 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, 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 media are agents of secularisation 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 secularisation role of the media was not proved and (2) there exist socially constructed moral categories, which are also accepted by journalists. He calls them *conventionalised 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 media as fundamentally 'religious'. Here, secularism is perceived as any other ritualised 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 Zasępa (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 religion leaders and the press is more the result of ignorance about how to handle religion stories than any antagonism toward religion per se. Other scholars find news values the cause of the lack of media interest in religious activities of Christians. For instance, Winston (2007) argues that social activities of Christian leftists are regarded as natural, continuous and not newsworthy. Absence of specialised religious editors is regarded 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 organisations provides an index of acculturation and control over valuable resources, such as the access to news production that shapes the organisation'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) specialises in media framing of the events in Vatican, and compares their coverage of secular and religious periodicals. He blames secular media for inconsistent verification of information, superficiality, tabloidisation 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 *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 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 disproportionality of reporting. Wright arrives at the key conclusion that media are allies of anti-cult organisations. Richardson and van Driel (1997) uses a rather offensive rhetoric and blames media for favouring ideologically dominant *status quo* and discrediting of differentiated groups. Hill, Hickman and McLendon (2001) argue that media are much more critical of NRM than the established churches (Catholic, Protestant), they overemphasise their (often putative) violent nature, whereby they, to some extent and almost prophetically, impose such an image on these groups.

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 relation 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 main question of our research was whether the religious messages are transportable by media, or, stated differently, whether the media language is suitable for the transmission of religious messages.

The answer to this question rests on the application of the method of quantitative content analysis (Gunter, 2000, p. 55-70), qualitative audience research methods based on *focus groups* (Hornig Priest, 1996, p. 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*[3] (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.

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 code based on qualitative audience research using Delphi and focus group methods. According to M. Sorice (De Blasio et al., 2007, p. 122), *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 B. Gunter, its proponents argue that this method has "higher ecological validity" than quantitative questionnaire or experiment-based methods (Gunter, 2000, p. 46). 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*[4], which corresponded to an active audience 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 the 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 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?
- 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 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 et al. 2007, p. 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 identified

	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 method 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 et al., 2007, p. 49). Therefore, a substantial difference can be observed between these two approaches: while the quantitative research leads to confirmation or falsification of the hypotheses, and, as a consequence, includes rather normative and self-confident conclusions, the qualitative research on the other hand arrives at the point where the 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 endeavor 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 code.

Results

News values and gospel values

Classical news values may be regarded as the first and most important feature of media code. This is what makes a piece of news worth its name. In a broader sense, this is what makes a journalistic material worth its name. To put it bluntly, that is what allows a piece of information to enter the process of selection, coverage and disclosure of news.

As clear from *Delphi* expert groups, the answer to the question about the presumptions journalists have before they decide to cover a religious topic is surprisingly simple: it is the very same presumption they have in respect of other topics, including a sieve

of news values. Thus, the deeply rooted understanding of the existence of prejudice is put in question. This topic would also deserve a more detailed examination, however, obviously, it cannot be discussed as part of inherent features of the media code.

There is a tendency to anticipate journalists' prejudice against religious topics, however, the lack of interest might have different causes, for example, a limited offer of journalistically unattractive topics.

And this does not pertain only to religious topics. "Politicians, big companies, public administration, all of them feel discontented," said František Múčka, editor of Trend, an economic weekly. The problem also stems from the fact that external communicators, including those within the church mistakenly identify their own view of attractiveness and significance of a topic with that of the public. Or, at the opposite extreme, they completely underestimate the importance of attractiveness and significance of a topic, and try to draw attention to an institution, person, etc. by means of a news message, which, however, may contain little or no information value. Despite public relations represent an important source of information for journalists (Hejlová, 2015, p. 106), church spokespersons are often unable to provide information in attractive form for media. And thus journalists receive news of a pilgrimage, for instance, which details names of preachers or organizers, and provides extensive accounts of the weather, but which, at the same time, lacks any single important thought from the homily, or some basic information such as the number of participants, history of the covered event, not to speak about the focus of this year's event. If a journalist lacks personal involvement and good will to publish important pieces of information, and does not make a phone call to the respective parish to obtain the missing piece of information, such a news message cannot end up anywhere else than in the dustbin.

Thus, news values are 'rules of the profession', the understanding and acceptance of which cannot be avoided. Does a religious message also contain these values? This is a key question when examining the capacity of media language to transmit religious messages.

News value is what makes a journalistic material worth its name. Religious message can only be though of as religious messages, if they incorporate values based on the aim and mission of Christian religion as such – i .e to preach God's love of man and encourage people to answer to God's calling and form a personal relation with God. This is the aim of the church attained mainly through personal testimonies (personal proclamation of one's experience with God and the unfolding of personal relation with God). To preserve the very essence of a religious message, the news message must contain something of this experience with God and His love and his presence in human life, which, then, translates into values we may call gospel values, and which can be identified with classical Christian virtues (love, justice, faith, solidarity, forgiveness, etc.)[5].

Are *gospel values completely* different than *news values* – or can intersections be found? Our research suggests that intersections *can* be found, however, it is far more difficult to find them in information based on *gospel news values* than in mere *news values* lying on the surface of conflicts, scandals, deviations, or some extravagant pieces of the elite. To present fidelity or forgiveness attractively requires more effort and a more intense and deeper immersion in the topic. "It takes more professionalism," concludes Diego Contreras, consulted as part of our research, Dean at the Faculty of Social Institutional Communications of the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross in Rome. "It is easier to appeal to instincts and instinctual drives, it is easier to descend than ascend. Therefore, a Christian journalist must be better."[6] The Chairman of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, Claudio Maria Celli, has provided his insight during the conference about today's challenges faced by journalists organized by the Council: "To be a Catholic journalist is far more demanding than to be a common journalist, as this requires a greater responsibility,"[7]. He has also specified three things that make a responsible Catholic journalist: to achieve high technical quality,

mediate the Teaching of the Church, and be able to engage in a true dialogue with the world. According to C. M. Celli, the capacity to enter in a true dialogue with the world requires openness to all parties, respect to partners, ability to sustain dialogue with oneself, and internal integrity.

This has also been the source of mutually negative experience of religious and journalistic communicators: if, on one hand, there is little or no motivation to pursue higher professional goals, and put in more effort (by those who provide the source information for journalists – i. e. those in charge of selection and processing in secular journalists, and in religious journalists working in church media responsible for wrapping religious messages into journalistic garments), then religious messages rarely drop through the sieve of news values, which then appears as-if too dense, irregularly woven, etc. Laziness coupled with lack of professionalism on both sides results in two extremes: journalists either give up *gospel value,* and, subsequently, superficial news values deprive the information of its content and meaning (a typical example can be a piece of news with an account of secondary phenomena such as the Pope's menu, health condition, and the Pope's tailor, when covering an important pastoral visit of the Pope, i. .e a piece of news which completely ignores the main idea). Or, on the other hand, journalists often give up *news values*, and thus leave journalistic style completely, which makes the news difficult to accept or digest by the audience.

Thus, in an effort to pull out a religious message from its natural environment and encode it medially, the understanding and acceptance of news values appears to be one of the key preconditions of success. "It is kind of a tax we pay to the journalistic environment," said Antonín Randa, chief editor of the Czech *Katolícky týdeník*. According to Randa, this process sometimes requires even resignation on the essence of a piece of information (message).

Here, we will examine in more detail some of the news values, which can be associated with religious messages. During our research, the following news values were identified as crucial: (1) conflict first and foremost, then (2) scandalousness, (3) entertainment, (4) fragmentation, (5) incompleteness, (6) stereotypes, and (7) story. For the sake of brevity, the following passage provides an account of news values, where religious and media communication intersect most vividly: (1) conflict, (2) scandalousness and (3) story.

Conflict

As clear from the aforementioned, the single most important news value is conflict. This can be supported by the fact that as part of the textual analysis and subsequent critical journalistic coverage, some authors limit themselves to the conflict itself, and regard conflict as the primary key for selection and coverage of topics by a professional journalist. By examining religious news coverage (especially the news about papal pastoral journeys) by secular media, Imrich Gazda arrived at a conclusion that journalists try to find a conflict in each topic, and for those topics where no conflict exists, they "elaborate" it (i. e. artificially re-create it, and thus, manipulate the news). (Gazda, 2009).

As demonstrated by our focus group research, common recipients see the emphasis of media on conflict almost negatively – they find it exaggerated and unnatural. The more critical part of the audience is usually able to identify that pervasive conflict does not correspond to reality. The use of conflict almost everywhere makes them feel manipulated and scornful about it. It is felt that journalists in their quest for conflict often over-interpret facts and behave arrogantly. With respect to media transmission of religious messages, members of our focus groups questioned whether we necessarily need conflict, and whether we need to see it in everything. Some have pointed to the fact that when anything served in a conflict-free manner fails to induce any thought or attention on the part of the recipient, then,

the problem does not lie with journalists, but with somebody else – a reader with his or her mind reformatted to conflict. And, quite naturally with those who effect, sustain, and promote such a mindset, i. e. the journalists. Thus, the aversion to conflict identified in recipients points to the artificial nature on one hand, but it also hints to a call for an alternative, especially in relation to religious messages in the media.

Such calls for an alternative are positive. However, it should be noted that a conflict-free world cannot become the basis of the output of religious communicators, since that would bring us to the opposite – not less negative – extreme. Such an approach poses a risk of abandoning the media language completely since this would deprive the media language of one of its key characteristics. For any critical recipient, a conflict-free approach to covering religious topics stinks of a false calm, suppression of facts, creation of 'smoke screens', distrust in the recipient's preparedness to hear the truth. "The church should not see itself as a monolith," said one of the participants of our research discussions in response to the idea to provide more room for opinion for more stakeholders in relation to religious topics. A conflict-free approach exaggerated to the extreme also hampers the efficiency of the transmitted message and is just as implausible as emphasizing conflict at any cost.

But why does the church avoid conflict when spreading its messages through the media? Opinions voiced during our research point towards two main reasons: caution and lack of freedom.

According to Jozef Kováčik, spokesperson of the Slovak Bishops' Conference, public statements (made by priests) on social issues should be guided by the principle of wisdom and prudence. According to Kováčik, the Papal Nuncio's Office in Slovakia has recommended talking about principles, and refraining from mentioning specific persons – not even dictators such as Hitler or Chávez (Kováčik, 2009). The church is inerrant and cannot afford to discredit herself by the flaw of 'personalizing' the negatives, since every person develops and the history teaches us that providing a certificate of veracity – or doing the opposite – is often uncertain and deceptive. "It is a problem to stand behind someone – you never know what may come out of that person," explains Juraj Gradoš, a Greek-Catholic priest. This pertains not only to political parties, presidential candidates, but also political and social problems in broadest sense. The response of those recipients who find specific political and social tensions or struggles important, was disapproving, especially in relation to the trade-off of morality and key values preserved and presented mainly by the church. They usually understand silence of the church (and its media) as a clear expression of cowardice, sterility and submission to external pressures on the part of the church representatives.

With respect to conflict as the key news value, it should be noted that the church puts herself in the role of an external observer. Respondents pointed to the fact that the church's typical reaction is no reaction, i. e. she expresses her attitude by remaining silent. „Such a reaction does not give the respective topic any importance," explains J. Kováčik (2009). Thereby the church wisely reacts to the so-called *agenda setting*, where media themselves try to define what will be 'talked about'. They first create a virtual reality and then project the importance of a specific topic in the eyes of the recipients, often artificially, in contradiction with the real value of that topic. The church does not wish to use her authority to promote, draw attention, or give credit to such topics. Thus, however, it falls into the trap of non-intervention. There is one more example of this. In the turbulent years around 2000, there was a real battle going on for support of the weekly between the Movement for Democratic Slovakia (HZDS), a party involved in bloody scandals, the extreme nationalist Slovak National Party (SNS), and Christian Democratic Movement avowing also Christian values. The former chief editor of the Slovak national weekly *Katolícke noviny (Catholic Newspaper),* Marián Gavenda, stated on behalf of the attitude of the weekly that "in the

newspaper, we would rather keep the line of a slight sterility, than assume the risk of being labeled as a supporter of a certain political representation" (Gavenda, 2005).

Such an approach, however, leads to embargos on certain topics and people in the broadcasting time conquered – so to speak – by the church within the media space (either by creating own media or by obtaining broadcasting time in public media). As part of our research discussions, a number of journalists complained about embargo imposed on certain people and topics. Oddly enough, topics and people potentially creating conflicts or introducing inadequate opinions are simply not welcome. However, this approach might lead to a situation where correct views are not apparent enough for recipients, who, in turn, might end up confused. As noted by J. Kováčik, broadcasting time is very precious, and it is not a good idea to waste it by presenting different opinions; it should be used to present our own view. Admittedly, this approach aims only at those who are already convinced. But the unconvinced (or those convinced about the opposite) need confrontation so they can make their own decision as to where they stand. „The aim is not to win new Catholics, but deepen the faith of believers, which should happen in a conflict-free manner," confirms the (subconscious) intention of the authors M. Raučinová, editor of *Katolícke noviny*.

Based on the results of our research, the second reason of avoiding conflict as mentioned above is lack of independence of the church or her representatives. This was repeatedly voiced by participants of our focus groups, especially in connection with the need of a more active social (hence political) engagement of the church. Within the groups, participants presented a strong view that public engagement of the church is very unlikely – even unthinkable – because bishops (not only Catholic) tend to collaborate with power, and 'get along well' with anybody. The underlying idea is not to anger the state, i. e. the government currently in power, because the church depends on state finances. According to the participants of our research, the disestablishment of the church and state might offer a potential solution to this problem.

Scandal

Common media recipients are more ready to mention 'scandal' in connection with media coverage, than 'conflict'. This was confirmed by our focus group discussions. Scandal seems to be the most striking of all news values. Scandals were among the first things mentioned by members of our research discussions in respect of religious topics. In addition, participants have also touched on the problem of the incomplete coverage of scandals. Recipients with deeper understanding of the problem have identified a lack of interest on the part of media to address all open questions related to the news, and their reluctance to clear the names of those injured, when the particular case eventually ends in favor of suspected persons. This, however, is a problem that goes beyond the relation of media and religious topics. It is a serious ethical problem addressed by established journalistic ethic codes by introducing the right to a supplementary announcement[8].

Nevertheless, scandal still belongs to the basic news values. Media cannot be blamed for this, although, quite naturally, the church representatives may feel that information about the church only enters the media on the condition of the existence of a scandal. "Media try to maintain their secular profile and focus exclusively on information, but only until a scandal comes up. From that moment, media are eager to cover religious topics," explains Juraj Gradoš, chief editor of *Slovo,* a Greek-Catholic bi-weekly.

In this respect, two questions have emerged during our research: (1) Is sensitivity of media to religious topics primarily sensation-driven, i. e. negativistic? If yes, this would point to a prejudice against religious topics, which should be examined separately. And, (2) Is the

reaction of the church to scandals brought by media well controlled and well managed? The question pertains to the problem of intra-church dialogue, which is also a topic for a separate paper. Here, we will limit ourselves to present several preliminary considerations.

The expression *scandal* originally means offence, in the first place. Scandal relates to offence – it is based on something, which contradicts the declared, expected, or required integrity of the scandalized person. In the case of church topics, the focus is on the contradiction between behavior and Christian moral principles, which the person upholds and declares. In that respect, media scandals can also be viewed positively as they may point to mistakes, and can be viewed as an opportunity to defend and strengthen the position of the church.

As stated by N. González Gaitano, in principle, media messages are based on the so-called *topoi*, i. e. a set of generally shared ideas. These are some principles – whether natural or cultural – which are not subject to public discussion, and which are accepted and taken as given. According to N. González Gaitano (2009) many *topoi* have roots in the gospel. However, media often build false structures and based thereupon they present internally contradictory and misleading conclusions (e. g. homosexuals refer to equality, but, in fact, what they ask for is social acceptance, not equality). For the church, this is a chance to uncover contradictions, touch upon the human mind and soul by drawing on this generally shared idea, and pursue a solid argumentation line on that basis. According to Gaitano's research, this was the case during the Pope Benedict XVI's visit to USA in April 2008. The Pope has managed to use direct personal contact to change predominantly negative views of media prior to the visit. In particular, this has become apparent in connection with sexual misconduct by priests, which was hotly debated in the USA at that time. By being frank and consistent, even in answering questions about the sexual abuse within the church during the visit, the Pope has managed to purify the image of the church in the eyes of the public. Thus, the scandal was positively used in favor of the church.

During our research discussions, the recipients have called for clear statements by the church on essential topics – including topics that scandalize the church. The church wishes to do so wisely, and, in Slovakia, she prefers excluding the public (hence the media) from a dialogue and solution of problems. The church is afraid of the immaturity of recipients, and refrains from disclosing her best arguments to avoid misuse. Here, the church relies on its timeless existence and stability, which is, so to speak, confirmed by centuries. However, it should be noted that the task of the church is to approach those who live today. Therefore the church needs to build bridges of trust with the living. And that can only happen if she preserves her moral authority. "From 1989, the church has not been regarded as a moral authority ", says Rado Pavlík, editor of SITA agency with a specialty in religious topics during one of our meetings with media experts. According to Pavlík, the reason behind this is the church's reluctance to interpret current news and events. On the other hand, continuous scandalizing of the church points to the fact that the institution is still regarded as a carrier of certain moral values, which should be upheld by the church herself. In that light, media scandals are, to a certain extent, a thrown gauntlet, which should be picked up by an able communicator to show that the church accepts guilt on members of the church, resolutely resolves incidents, makes clear statements, takes effective measures, and, if appropriate, provides inconvertible proof of innocence, in a word, the church must communicate and face the problem.

Story

From the beginning of journalism until today, story has always been one of the most important carriers of information. As stated by D. Klimeš (2009), today, it is imperative to insert stories where ten years ago, a description would do. In practice, this means that when a journalist attempts to inform about introducing fees at the doctor's, a story of a homeless is woven into the news, thus, plain news is hinged onto a story with strong social connotations.

The story, as a significant news value and part of the journalistic language code, is highly correlated with traditional instruments used in spreading religious messages, especially testimonies. Testimony is one of the key instruments of the church which can be employed to pursue her evangelization efforts. According to Catechism of the Catholic Church, the name catechesis was given to "the totality of the Church's efforts to make disciples, to help men believe that Jesus is the Son of God so that believing they might have life in his name, and to educate and instruct them in this life, thus building up the body of Christ. (CCC 4). (Rončáková, 2009)

A story in the form of a testimony appears to share common ground in respect of both the *news values* and *gospel values*, hence, it is one of the most efficient ways of encoding religious messages into media language. This was also substantiated by members of our research discussions, who agreed that stories can successfully carry religious messages. "If we are to evangelize 'between the lines', presenting stories of our readers is a very effective way to do that," explains M. Raučinová, editor of *Katolícke novniny*. And the chief editor of *Slovo*, a Greek-Catholic bi-weekly adds that the news about God becomes journalistically attractive, if it contains what Jesus has done on earth: "the blind see, the lame walk, and the deaf hear... And that's gospel."

To reject to include a story is to reject the essence of media communication code and media language as such. On the other hand, to regard story as a significant means of expression leads to efficient media communication. "My job is not to produce messages about harmful effects of contraception or the evil of artificial abortion on a daily basis, but provide the audience with stories of ordinary people," says Radoslav Igaz to describe his job within the journalistic team of the most popular commercial television in Slovakia, *Markíza* (Igaz, 2009). If he decided to smuggle his own position in the news item at any cost, he would quickly close the door for any religious message. Bringing light stories of people in the street might seem less creative or serious, and less prestigious journalism. However, Igaz, with a healthy dose of modesty, regards such stories as an effective tool to present spiritual or even religious values. As he puts it, even for him personally, covering these stories is encouraging, and therefore he seeks to encourage viewers.

To encourage people, to give them hope, to reveal the origins of God's intentions contained in Revelation and religion in front of people's eyes is, after all, the very aim of the church seeking to spread the good news. This was also the point made by Alžbeta Mráková, chief editor of *Família,* a Catholic family weekly. She sees "difficult stories of families – their stumbles, their victories, and their quests for a new meaning of life" as one of the key pillars of the content of the magazine" (Mráková, 2009).

Discussion

This paper investigates the inherent features of media language code and attempts to examine them in the light of the spreading of religious messages through media. It was shown that in several aspects which are crucial for media code, the journalistic encoding of messages and the religious encoding diverge. However, such a disproportion is not inevitable. On the

contrary, the inherent features of media communication code also facilitate an efficient transmission of religious messages.

Our key thesis was based on a premise that one of the pillars of the media language code is the structure of news values. Without embracing these values a journalist cannot exercise the profession and work effectively within its communication framework. *News values* are 'values' which make the information 'worth' attention of both the journalist and recipient. On the other hand, *gospel values* are values which make the religious message worth its name. If the journalistic encoding of a religious message is to be successful, intersection between journalistic and religious values needs to be found. Does such intersection exist? We may conclude that such intersection exists, but this can only be achieved at the cost of investing more effort and placing higher demands on journalists, which are required to be prepared to look for news values under the surface of instincts and instinctual drives. *News values* can be viewed as certain 'rules of profession'; without them, the output transmitted through the media space cannot be regarded as media product. This means that in principle, it is possible to produce journalistic materials containing religious messages.

When individual *news values* are put under scrutiny, a set of values which help to spread religious messages becomes more evident. As part of our research we have focused on three of them: conflict, scandal and story.

For the church, conflict is a quite naturally part of her public presence. "Do you suppose that I am here to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division," said Jesus Christ (Luke 12,51). Anyone who remains faithful and clings onto the 'uncomfortable' Christian mission eventually runs into conflict with the environment. A correct understanding and comprehension of the essence and power of conflict as the most important news value represents a huge potential for religious messages in media environment. However, our research has also revealed fears of a conflict on the part of religious communicators, as well as a tendency to avoid such conflict. We have identified two main causes of such a fear: first, caution (as an extreme expression of discretion) and second, internal dependence (material dependence on the power of state). Exploiting the potential of conflict by the church requires very able religious communicators. Lack of such communicators appears to be one of the main reasons behind the failure in this field. The ability to enter this arena requires courage. Indeed, calls for courage were often voiced by participants of our research discussions, who also identified a significant gap in the understanding of the social teaching of the church. "If the church consistently stood on the side of the oppressed and the weak, it would inevitably run into conflicts," concluded one of the respondents. Common recipients participating in our focus groups have pointed to the lack of topics such as economic crisis, layoffs, management ethics, inadequate profits, or ethnic conflicts, in the coverage of the church media. This finding also points to the fact which has continued to reemerge in our research discussions: media recipients regard explication of social and political events in the light of the teaching of the church as one of the most significant challenges the church faces today.

Scandal is an expression, which also bears the meaning of an offence. However, any offence is based on a generally accepted idea with roots in nature or culture (*topos*). Even though in its negative extreme, scandals presented in media are often sensation-driven, in principle, it can also be employed to spread religious message, or cement the authority and credibility of the church. This can be done by correct treatment of *topos* and skillful communication based thereupon. This may also comprise reactions of religious communicators to existing scandals, or active incitement of public uproar over a contemptible action and the motivation of such an action.

Story is a carrier with the biggest potential to communicate religious messages through media. It can be identified with testimony, which is the single most powerful tool,

which may help the church in spreading the news about God and His presence in the life of people on earth. Personal testimony of God at work is very powerful, and, at the same time, it is not artificial and works 'between the lines'. It is inappropriate to look at communicators of religious messages who use stories as 'lower-style' journalists who seek escape from serious journalism.

As for other characteristics inherently contained in the essence of the media language code, we have identified qualities such as fragmentation, 'flashiness', generalization and simplification, limited ability to transmit the essence of things, superficial character, disinterest about quality, certain language-related specifics and audience awareness. For the sake of brevity, we cannot deal with them in more detail. In general, the communication code of media communication in connection with the religious message can be regarded as an inhibitor, which – if employed correctly – may become a catalyst. We have pointed to some specific problems and their solutions, the employment of which may contribute to professionalism of both communicators, i. e. the journalists, and persons authorized to communicate on behalf of the church.

Notes

[2] This study was based on Catholic research sample, and the cultural context of this study is also Catholic.

[3] R. Entman 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" (Entman, 2004). According to him, 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 (Entman, 1993).

[4] *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 – from the most passive consumers accepting anything that is brought up – likened to a sack of potatoes sitting in a sofa in front of a TV – to more selective and critical types of audience with 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 (Sorice, 2007).

[5] An attempt to provide a complete list of all virtues was made by Hildegard of Bingen in the 12th century, and includes 35 virtues matched to respective vices. The listed virtues include discipline, chastity, mercifulness, patience, moderation, generosity, truthfulness, peace, humility, obedience, justice, courage and perseverance (Rajčan Zaviš, 2007, p. 108).

[6] Consultation with D. Contreras conducted as part of the research.

[7] Presented at the international conference *Identità e Missione di una Facoltà di Comunizacione di una Università Cattolica* (Identity and Mission of the Faculty of Communication at the Catholic University), organized at the instigation of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications on 22 – 24 May 2008 in Rome.

[8] The right to a supplementary announcement is the right of a person mentioned in the media in connection with a suspected criminal activity to be provided with a room to present a piece of information about the outcome of the case, if the original suspicion is proven false.

References

Bahonar, N. (2009), Policy of Religious Media in Iran: Interactive, Dynamic and Convergent System of Religious Communication, *Asian Journal of Social Science*. 2(37), 242-255. CrossRef

Buddenbaum, J. M. (1998), *Reporting News about Religion: An Introduction for Journalists.* Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press.

Contreras, D. (2007), "Framing" e "news values" nell'informazione sulla Chiesa cattolica. In J. M. Mora, D. Contreras & M. Carroggio (Eds.), *Direzione strategica della comunicazione della Chiesa*, (p. 121-136). Rome: Edusc.

Cruz, D. de la. (2009), Coincidence and Consequence: Marianism and the Mass Media in the Global Philippines, *Cultural Anthropology*. 3(24), 455-488. CrossRef

Dart, J. & Allen, J. (1993), *Bridging the Gap: Religion and the News Media*. Nashville: Freedom Forum First Amendment Center.

Dart, J. (1997), Covering Conventional and Unconventional Religion: A Reporter´s View, *Review of Religious Research*. 2(39), 144-152. CrossRef

De Blasio, E., Gili, G., Hibberd, M. & Sorice, M. (2007), *La ricerca sull´audience*. Milano: Hoepli.

Entman, R. M. (1993), Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm, *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 51-58. CrossRef

Entman, R. M. (2004), *Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion and US Foreign Policy.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Gavenda, M. (2005), We want to Revive the Slogan: Catholic Newspaper to Every Family. In M. Dyttert (Ed.), *Do the Christian Media Fulfill their Tasks in the Slovak Society?*, (p. 9-21). Ružomberok: Philosophical Faculty of the Catholic University.

Gazda, I. (2009), Presentation of Religious Events in Print Media. In B. Slobodová & J. Višňovský (Eds.), *Quo Vadis Mass Media*, (p. 389-399). Trnava: University of St. Cyril and Methodius.

González Gaitano, N. (2008), Lineamenti metodologici per l´esame della rappresentazione delle radici della socialità che hanno origine nella famiglia. In N. González Gaitano (Ed.), *Familia e Media. Il detto e il non detto*, (p. 14-23). Rome: Edusc.

González Gaitano, N. (2009), Public and Published Views on the Catholic Church before and after Benedict XVI trip to the US, *paper presented at the guest lecture.* Ružomberok: Department of Journalism of the Philosophical Faculty at the Catholic University.

Gunter, B. (2000), *Media Research Methods*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: SAGE Publications.

Hejlová, D. (2015), *Public Relations*. Prague: Grada.

Hill, H., Hickman, J. & McLendon, J. (2001), Cults and sects and doomsday groups, oh my: Media treatment of religion on the eve of the millennium, *Review of Religious Research*. 1(43), 24-38. CrossRef

Hoover, D. M. & Venturelli, S. S. (1996), The category of the religious: The blindspot of contemporary media theory?, *Critical Studies in Mass Communication.* 13(3), 251-265. CrossRef

Hoover, S. M. & Clark, L. S. (1997), Event and Publicity as Social Drama: A Case Study of the RE-Imagining Conference, *Review of Religious Research*, 2(39), 153-171. CrossRef

Hoover, S. M. & Lundby, K. (1997), *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture*. Thousand Oaks, Cal.: Sage.

Hornig Priest, S. (1996), *Doing Media Research.* London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: SAGE Publications.

Igaz, R. (2009), Journalist in a Mainstream Television, *paper presented at the conference Media, Ethics and the Role of a Christian.* Nitra: Hanusfellowship.

Iłowiecki, M. & Zasępa, T. (2003), *The Powerfulness and Illness of Media.* Bratislava: Typi universitatis Tyrnaviensis, Veda.

Khojaste, H. & Kalantari, A. (2009), The Media Rituals: The Relationship between Media and Religion, *Asian Journal of Social Science*. 2(37), 284-304. CrossRef

Klimeš, D. (2009), Infotainment as a New Phenomenon in the Czech media landscape, *paper presented at the International Scientific Conference Media 20 Years after.* Prague: Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University.

Kováčik, J. (2009), Does the Roman-Catholic Church need media?, *paper presented at the conference Media, Ethics and the Role of a Christian*. Nitra: Hanusfellowship.

Meyer, B. & Moors, A. (2006), *Religion, media, and the public sphere.* Bloomington, Indianapolis, Indiana: Indiana University Press.

Meyer, B. (2008), Media and the senses in the making of religious experience: an introduction, *Material Religion*. 2(4), 124-134. CrossRef

Mitchell, J. & Marriage, S. (2003), *Mediating Religion: Studies in Media, Religion, and Culture*. London and New York, NY: Bloomsbury T&T Clark.

Mráková, A. (2009), Dear Editors, Whom do you Work for? Or... How to Set up a Functional Media Family, *paper presented at the seminar Do the Slovak Catholic Media Fulfill their Mission? II.* Ružomberok: Department of Journalism of the Philosophical Faculty of the Catholic University.

Murdock, G. (1997), The Re-Enchantment of the World. Religion and the Transformations of Modernity. In Hoover, S. M. & Lundby, K. (Eds.), *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture*, (Pp. 85-101). Thousand Oaks, Cal.: Sage.

Rajčan Zaviš, M. (2007), Theological Concept of Hildegarde of Bingen. In I. Kišš & S. Horňanová (Eds.), *A Woman in the Church*, (p. 102-110). Bratislava: Evangelical Theological Faculty of the Comenius University.

Richardson, J. T. & van Driel, B. (1997), Journalists´ Attitudes toward New Religious Movements, *Review of Religious Research*, 2(39), 116-136. CrossRef

Rončáková, T. (2009), Applicability of Media Language in Transmitting Religious Messages. In M. Ivanová, M. Ološtiak & L. Gianitsová-Ološtiaková (Eds.), *Varia XVIII. Collection of papers from the XVIII. Colloquium of young linguists,* (p. 626-636). Prešov: Prešov University.

Rončáková, T. (2010), *At the Intersection of Religious and Journalistic Style III. Can the Church Speak Media Language?* Prague: Paoline.

Shupe, A. (1994), Bridging the Gap – Religion and the News Media, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. 1(33), 87-89. CrossRef

Shupe, A. (1997), Vicissitudes of Public Legitimacy for Religious Groups: A Comparison of the Unification and Roman Catholic Churches, *Review of Religious Research*. 2(39), 172-183. CrossRef

Silk, M. (1995), *Unsecular Media: Making News of Religion in America*. Chicago, Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Silk, M. (1997), Journalists with Attitude: a Response to Richardson and van Driel, *Review of Religious Research*. 2(39), 137-143. CrossRef

Sorice, M. (2007), L´Audience, *lectures as part of the university course.* Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University Centre for Interdisciplinary Communication Studies.

Stolow, J. (2005), Religion and/as media, *Theory Culture & Society*. 4(22), 119-145. CrossRef

Stout, D. A. & Buddenbaum, J. M. (1996), *Religion and Mass Media: Audiences and Adaptations*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Stout, D. A. & Buddenbaum, J. M. (2008), Approaches to the study of media and religion: Notes from the Editors of the Journal of Media and Religion with recommendations for future research, *Religion*. 3(38), 226-232.

Thomas, P. N. (2008), *Strong Religion, Zealous Media: Christian Fundamentalism and Communication in India*. New Delhi: Sage.

Winston, D.H. (2007), Back to the Future: Religion, Politics, and the Media, *American Quarterly*. 3(59), 969-989. CrossRef

Wright, S. A. (1997), Media coverage of unconventional religion: Any "good news" for minority faiths?, *Review of Religious Research*. 2(39), 101-115. CrossRef