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Young Adults, Digital Media, and Religion. Broadening the Scope

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Young Adults, Digital Media, and Religion

Broadening the Scope

Abstract

Looking at youth and young adults when researching religion and media is an approach that can lead to important results. Young people are often on the forefront of media developments and are likely to impact how religious groups utilize and incorporate media in their practices. Building on the findings of an international project and earlier research, this article highlights three interconnected areas worthy of more attention in the study of religion and media: the limitation of most studies to specific settings and university students and thus the need to expand this demographic; the importance of studying online and offline religion as interconnected and related; the need to study not only religion and media but also how media might contribute to individuals leaving their religious identity behind and provide spaces for atheist identities and communities.

Keywords

Young Adults, Religion, Digital Media, Digital Religion, Religious Identity

Biography

Sofia Sjö is the Research Manager at the Donner Institute for Research into Religion and Culture and holds the title of Associate Professor in the Study of Religions at Åbo Akademi, University, Finland. Her research interests include religion and film, religion and media, digital religion, and religion and youth.

Introduction

From 2015 to 2019, I had the opportunity to be a part of an international project focusing on the religious, spiritual, and secular worldviews of young adult university students in 12 countries around the world, among them Finland, Turkey, Canada, Peru and India. The project – Young Adults and Religion in a Global Perspective (YARG) – brought together around 40 researchers and research assistants. It collected both survey and interview data and tested out a new method for studying worldviews, the Faith Q-Sort. Its

results were noteworthy. They illustrated both recurring features and noteworthy differences regarding worldviews among young people the world over.¹ The study highlighted five global “worldview prototypes”, but it also illustrated, for example, how being spiritual had different connotations in different settings, tied more to religion in one area and to a secular perspective in another.² Though media was not the main topic of the YARG study, it was an integral part of it. Questions regarding media were brought up in both the survey and the interviews. Several articles³ and an edited volume related to media and religion⁴ came out of the project.

The study of youth, religion and media is a fast-growing field. As changes in media use are often first present in younger generations, focusing on youth helps one see trends regarding the use of media in religious life too. Research has highlighted, among other things, how media can be used by young people to challenge authorities, build community and explore religious identities.⁵ However, though current research in this area is rich, it also has limitations. In this article, I will highlight some of the findings of YARG, in particular the need for more varied perspectives in future research, which will help media and religion research stay relevant. Building on the findings from the project and related research, I will discuss three interlinked areas deserving of greater attention: (1) the need to explore and compare diverse settings and participants, (2) the usefulness of connecting research into religion online with research into religion offline to capture contemporary religious behaviour, and (3) the necessity of acknowledging that media can be part of religious life, by providing new ways to connect and learn, but can also be a way out of religion.

Varying Settings and Participants

Conducting a study in 12 different countries requires many kinds of resources. Though the YARG project illustrated the usefulness of studying a

1 For an overview, see the main findings published in Nynäs/Keysar/Kontala/Golo/Lassander/Shterin/Sjö/Stenner 2022.

2 Nynäs 2022.

3 See for example Moberg/Sjö/Golo/Gökçe/Fernández Hart/Cardenas/Benyah/Jó 2019; Moberg/Kheir/Gökce 2020.

4 Moberg/Sjö 2020.

5 For an overview see Moberg/Sjö 2023.

variety of settings with varied cultural, religious and political backgrounds, this breadth cannot generally be asked of research projects. However, one can take to heart the reality that looking beyond one's usual setting is instructive. A comparative approach has long been a core feature of the study of religion.⁶ Though comparisons always come with challenges – how do we know we are talking about the same things? how do we translate instruments in a reliable way? how can we incorporate knowledge from varied settings?, to mention just a few concerns – they do generally emphasize how much we can learn by looking beyond the sites we know.

An important, though hardly surprising, finding of YARG was that the setting, with its varied religious, cultural and political contexts, matters.⁷ We do see some general trends that are prominent in all the gathered material. However, contextual aspects cannot be ignored, particularly when we are dealing with media and religion. The young adult university students we studied were all part of the millennial generation often described as digital natives – they have grown up with digital media and are avid users of digital tools.⁸ For most of them digital media is thus a natural and accepted part of their everyday lives.⁹ On this point the students are similar across the countries studied. Still, their specific situation clearly shapes aspects of religion and media and also the way religion and media are combined.

This situational difference can best be illustrated by a quick comparison of two of the studied settings: China and Ghana. While China was one of the less religious contexts in the sample according to several factors, Ghana was clearly the most religious. Both countries have a rich media landscape. However, the social media used, the presence of religion in media, and the way digital media is deployed for religious purposes all vary. In Ghana, digital media is one of many ways the participants get information about religion or are religiously active. Participants report regularly listening to religious sermons online and sharing devotional messages through social media.¹⁰ The restrictions and strict control of both digital media and religion in China means that religion is not particularly present in Chinese media. Still, here too, participants report using media to find information about

6 See for example Freiburger 2019.

7 Nynäs/Keysar/Shterin/Sjö 2022.

8 Margaryan/Littlejohn/Vojt 2011.

9 Sjö/Moberg/Lövheim/Lagerström 2020, 35–37.

10 Golo/Sjö/Benyah 2020.

religion. However, the kind of media used differs: asked about sources of information, China participants mention print media and courses on religion at university more often than online media.¹¹

We thus cannot assume that university students who are active users of digital media are always similar. A closer look at their backgrounds highlights the reality that university students in different settings around the world can differ a great deal.¹² In some of the countries explored in YARG, the students were generally younger, in their late teens or early twenties in the case of, for example, China. But in Sweden there were a good number of older students, closer to their thirties, who were therefore dealing with different life situations and expectations. One thus needs to be careful not to generalize from findings in one country setting.

An additional challenge is that in many studies of young adults, media and religion, the sample is made up of university students.¹³ This is understandable, as they are often found right outside the academic researcher's door and thus make for a convenient subject group. They are also of interest because they are members of a privileged group and more likely to take up influential roles in the future. However, university students are not representative of all young adults. Ideally studies should embrace young adults with diverse educational, economic, religious and social backgrounds and life experiences, even though doing so will require significant effort. Luckily some studies have done so,¹⁴ and more are hopefully to come.

Connecting the Online and the Offline

As noted by Heidi Campbell and Mia Lövheim, religion online and offline are connected in various ways and thus the two areas should be explored together.¹⁵ The findings of the YARG study, too, highlight the close relationship of the online and offline worlds in the religious lives of young adult university students. In the results of the survey, which included questions

11 Sjö/Moberg/Nynäs/Tang 2020.

12 Klingenberg/Sjö/Moberg 2022.

13 A simple search for these terms online provides a plethora of titles where the sample comprises university students.

14 A well-known study of young adults and religion where media also plays a part is Smith/Snell 2009. Other noteworthy studies are Arweck/Penny 2015; Bromander 2012.

15 Campbell 2012; Campbell/Lövheim 2011.

on religiosity and media use,¹⁶ we can see a correlation between degrees of religiosity and the likelihood of using the Internet for religious or spiritual purposes. While the young adults overall did not report using the Internet much for religious purposes, those that identified as more religious used it comparatively more often.¹⁷

This connection is evident not only in an analysis of the survey results, but also in the interviews conducted with a smaller sample of the participants. The participants seek information about religion online, follow religious experts, listen to sermons and lectures, share religious texts and reflections on social media, and take part in maintaining sites for the distribution of religious information. However, all of this is usually reported as being done in connection to the participants' religious lives offline. Online lectures are reflected on with friends and religious professionals offline. Keeping connected to international networks of like-minded people online also enriches one's religious life offline.¹⁸

Though the participants in the YARG study come across as active users of the Internet and social media, it must be noted that they are at the same time critical users. They are aware of the problems with social media, they are critical of the information they find online, and they are thoughtful about how they express their religiosity online.¹⁹ This is particularly the case in more secular settings or where religion tends to be debated. Some of the participants reported avoiding discussions of religion online as they felt those discussions tended to become aggressive and unconstructive,²⁰ mirroring findings in earlier studies.²¹ Others reported carefully considering whether to express their religious beliefs on social media. They were aware of the image they were building, what others might think, and how this might influence both their online and offline lives.²²

16 The questions included, "Do you consider yourself as belonging to one or more religious groups, communities, or traditions?" "Regardless of whether you consider yourself as belonging or close to a particular religious group, community, or tradition, how religious would you say you are?" "In the past month, how frequently did you use the following media?", "If you ever use the Internet, for which of the following activities do you use it?". For the full survey see for example Moberg/Sjö 2020.

17 Sjö/Moberg/Lövheim/Lagerström 2020.

18 See for example Golo/Sjö/Benyah 2020; Kheir/Moberg 2020.

19 See for example Golo/Sjö/Benyah 2020; Sztajer/Sjö 2020.

20 See for example Sztajer/Sjö 2020.

21 See for example Herbert 2013.

22 See for example Dahl/Sjö/Moberg 2020.

Young adults today are thus largely, and independently of where they are from, living “onlife”, that is to say, they live in a hyperconnected reality where it does not make sense to make a strict separation between life online and life offline, to borrow Luciano Floridi’s concept.²³ However, the cultural and religious setting still clearly matters. In a situation where religion is visible both offline and online, expressing and exploring religion online is less of an issue. While here too a reflective approach to digital media can be observed, a user might not reflect to the same extent on how their religious life online is comprehended by others, both offline and online.²⁴ In other settings, often those where religion is less present offline, one’s religious identity online may be something to be considered and presented more carefully. This variation illustrates the need to thoroughly explore the role social media plays in religious identity construction today, for it highlights the complex reflections that may be behind what seems like a simple post. A lack of religious posts online thus does not necessarily reflect a lack of a religious life either online or offline; it might be indicative of careful online religious identity construction.²⁵

Non-religion and Media

Though media often is a resource in religious life today, particularly for younger generations, as religion and media scholars we must not ignore the role media plays in critical attitudes towards religion and in leaving religion. Non-religious perspectives and secular worldviews as expressed in media are an understudied field compared to the quickly expanding area of religion and media research. However, if we want to explore not just religious worldviews and media but also worldviews more broadly, looking at expressions of secular viewpoints in media is essential.

YARG underlined the prevalence of secular perspectives and worldviews among the young adult university students taking part in the project. The participants were asked to assess their religiosity on a scale from one to ten. The mean for all participants was just below four. Ghana stood out with

23 Floridi 2014.

24 See for example Golo/Sjö/Benyah 2020.

25 For a more in-depth reflection on social media and identity negotiations, see Tagg/Seargeant 2016.

the highest mean, at just under seven. At the other end, we find Sweden, Canada, and Russia with a mean below three.²⁶ In the identified worldviews – explored with the new Faith-Q-sort method – secular worldviews were prevalent.²⁷ The study did not identify a great deal of difference regarding the prevalence of media use among those identifying with different worldviews, but a closer look at the interviews underscores the role media can play in forming critical views on religion.

Recent research on atheism online has highlighted the role of atheist YouTubers²⁸ as well as the centrality of media more generally in the construction of atheist or expressively non-religious identities.²⁹ Atheist YouTubers were also of interest to participants in the YARG study, some of whom used media to explore non-religious worldviews. Particularly in the sample from Peru, a more critical perspective on religion was expressed in the interviews, and in these views, digital media also played a part, as the participants reported coming across critical perspectives via the Internet and social media.³⁰

The cultural and religious setting is evidently a central issue for future research into expressions of non-religious or anti-religious feelings and opinions. While holding a non-religious viewpoint is in some settings unproblematic, in others it means one is the odd one out. This also means that for those with atheist views, media may be a more significant resource in some parts of the world, such as a society strongly shaped by religion, than in other parts of the world, such as already very secular societies. In this case too, the connection between the online and offline is essential to explore.³¹

Conclusion

The YARG project, like others before it, highlighted the need to explore the specific role of media exposure and use when studying contemporary worldviews. The study underscored the importance of considering settings with different cultural, religious and political backgrounds, of connecting

26 Klingenberg/Sjö/Moberg 2022, 25.

27 Nynäs/Keysar/Lagerström 2022.

28 Isomaa 2022; Lundmark 2023.

29 Evolvi 2019; Scheidt 2021.

30 Fernánades/Cardenas/Moberg 2022.

31 For an example of current research focusing on the online and offline, see Evolvi 2019.

the online and the offline, and of considering the role of media in different forms of worldviews, be they religious, spiritual or secular.

One essential aim of YARG was to take on the methodological and theoretical challenges in exploring worldviews from a transnational perspective.³² I would argue that future studies of media and religion also need to take on these challenges. How do we integrate people from diverse contexts and different academic settings into our projects? How do we move beyond contextual specificities in comprehension of both religion and media and find a common framework? What are the ethical and practical challenges related to exploring religion both online and offline?

Though YARG has provided many noteworthy insights, the material from the project, particularly in relation to digital media, is quickly becoming dated as new technologies and uses develop. There is thus a need to look ahead and, building on what we have learned, make plans for future endeavours. Though a new study across twelve countries may not be feasible, bringing together scholars, theories, methods and insights from different settings is certainly a worthy aim.

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32 This next step is explored in the final volume associated with the project: Nynäs/Illman/Novis-Deutsch/Fernández-Hart 2024.

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