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## The Study of Religion, Film and Media: Trends and Future Directions. Editorial

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# The Study of Religion, Film and Media

## Trends and Future Directions

### Editorial

Congratulations, JRFM! With this issue we celebrate the ten-year anniversary of the *Journal for Religion, Film and Media* (JRFM), which has been published in cooperation with scholars and institutions in Europe and the United States since 2015. We are using this moment to take stock of current trends and consider future developments in the study of religion and media. These themes were discussed at the conference “Open Success!?! Research and Publishing in Religion, Film and Media”, held in Graz, Austria, in September 2023. The conference considered two topics that are shaping the work of JRFM: (1) the possibilities and challenges of Open Access (OA) publication (i. e. a journal that does not charge readers or authors) and (2) issues influencing research in this field. In its Thematic Section, this issue collects contributions in which scholars involved in the work of the journal as members of the editorial or advisory board reflect on aspects they consider to be of significance to the field in this moment and their potential to influence its future direction. The response by Giulia Evolvi places the articles in the larger context of what she identifies as current trends and challenges in the field. It is our great pleasure that the Open Section includes an article by Robert K. Johnston, whose research in theology and film has greatly influenced the field.

The journey of JRFM began in 2014 with Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati and Christian Wessely’s initiative to develop and launch a diamond Open Access as a platform for research on religion and media that is intentionally interdisciplinary and while primarily focused on audio-visual media is open to analysis of how other media (bodies, clothes, books and more) interact with religion. Today, scholars from fourteen countries and with a broad range of research interests and expertise are involved in the production of two issues per year. They are published on the journal’s webpage ([jrfm.eu](http://jrfm.eu)) and in the

permanent repository at the University Library at Graz (<http://unipub.uni-graz.at/jrfm/>) and are available as print-on-demand through a collaboration with Schüren publishing house, Marburg, Germany.

Research on religion and media is conducted by scholars affiliated with a range of disciplines, including religious studies, theology, media and communication studies, history, sociology, and others, and scattered across many universities and institutions. The highly interdisciplinary character of this research area can make it difficult to find a publication venue given the often rigid disciplinary boundaries shaping the profiles of many journals. Thus, from the very beginning JRFM was conceived as a platform for promoting exchanges among researchers in this field and for highlighting the relevance of media for the study of religion in all spheres of society and culture, and from many perspectives. Over the last decade, the journal has been received by a broad audience of readers and authors worldwide, a readership made possible not least by its OA policy. After ten years, JRFM is at the center of a vibrant interdisciplinary network of researchers.

As a diamond OA journal, JRFM has participated in the discussions around OA publishing in the humanities. The pros and cons of this (r)evolution are a regular topic for members of the editorial and advisory boards, together with stakeholders from different sectors of OA, including libraries, publishing houses, academic institutions, public research funds, and political authorities. As Christian Wessely discusses in his contribution to this issue, Open Access is not simply a tool for providing free access to research results but it also influences the way research projects are organized and documented, and is part of a broader transformation of research paradigms in the context of mediatization and digitalization in the humanities and in academic scholarship.

The first issue of JRFM, published in November 2015, offered a reflection on the range of approaches and methods used to conceptualize and analyze the multi-layered and multi-faceted interactions between religion and media. As Marie-Therese Mäder's contribution for this issue shows, the question of method (focusing here specifically on how to study the reception of media) is still relevant and will continue to occupy a field that is integrating an ever-broader range of disciplines along with their respective concepts, theories and methods.

Since that first issue, media technologies have changed dramatically. New technologies such as generative AI, increasingly pervasive social media, and media tools such as Zoom, which are all used regularly by large numbers

of individuals, will continue to influence interactions between media and religion and their study. Philippe Bornet's contribution to this issue provides an example of such developments in pointing to both the historical and the transnational circulation of images and to new connections made possible by the digitization of primary sources and research results.

In these last ten years, the institutional context for the study of religion has also changed, not least because of the elimination of some religion-related degree programs and departments of religious studies, the primary (although not exclusive) home of scholars researching religion and media. As Alexander D. Ornella's contribution shows, these changes in institutional conditions have to be taken into consideration when reflecting on the future of the field. He also points out, however, that the study of media and religion can create awareness of the importance of religion in social dynamics in the global context and could thus in turn increase enrollment numbers in relevant programs.

Another significant development in recent years that will shape the future direction of the field is the internationalization of research in religion and media with regard to the media studied and the scholars involved. Here OA publishing makes a crucial contribution. The contribution by Mirna Vohnsen explores the exciting work being done in the field of Latin American Jewish film studies, showing how religion and media studies can bring together marginalized fields, in this instance, the study of Latin American media products (which can be expanded to material from the Global South more broadly) and non-Christian religious traditions. That such work will have to grapple with the ways in which media (and their study) are involved in power dynamics is reflected in Yara González-Justiniano's contribution, which proposes a toolset for analyzing decolonial aesthetics. While applied here to examples of Puerto Rican artists and media producers, this approach can be used to study a wide range of cases. The need for diversity, within the scholarly community and among its subjects of study, is also one of the insights shared by Sofia Sjö in her consideration of a large international study of youth and religion, where she focuses on the results pertaining to interactions with media. Emphasizing the specific cultural and political contexts which shape how young people perceive and use media in the context of religion, Sjö notes that diversity amongst research subjects should not only be recognized but also actively fostered.

In her response to the articles in this anniversary issue, Giulia Evolvi first insists on methods, advocating for global and integrated perspectives

rooted in the study of contexts. The digital age has brought not only new methodological challenges and opportunities but also new topics for research, such as the relationship between religion and AI. She then highlights three themes that run through the contributions and suggest fruitful directions for future research: power dynamics that allow media to be used to promote or silence a particular worldview; decoloniality, which attends to the mediatized voice of underrepresented groups; and the reconfiguration of religion in a post-secular world, a phenomenon that often involves specific mediatization practices.

JRFM is a vital platform for exploring the relationships between religion, media and society, both in the present and in the past. Questions investigated in this field are arguably key to ensuring that the study of religion remains relevant to both students and stakeholders in the contemporary academic world. In addition, JRFM's aim to bring together an interdisciplinary community of scholars willing to cultivate a collegial spirit remains a crucial objective for the study of religion and media in general, even though it is perhaps the exception rather than the rule in today's segmented academic world. Finally, as a peer-reviewed, Open Access publication, JRFM is positioned to promote the internationalization of the field and to bring high quality discussions on religion and media to a widening audience beyond Europe. We look forward to the next ten years of exciting research published in JRFM.