Religion on Many Platforms:

Approaching Religion Reporting in an Era of Multimedia

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INTRODUCTION

In December 2008, the American news industry received news of its own. The internet had emerged as the leading source for national and international news, outperforming all other media expect for television, according to the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2008). However by 2013, the reality was starker as the average time spent with digital media per day surpassed TV viewing time, according to estimates by eMarketer, a research firm focused on digital marketing, media and commerce trends (2013). The digital age has succeeded in changing the way information is exchanged, and news outlets have had the challenge of keeping up.

Running parallel to the changing journalistic landscape was another story – religion and its relevance in the 21st century. From the search for a new pope to oppressive regimes in the Middle East, religion was beginning to more commonly permeate everyday, secular discourse. Through the process of globalization, religion's influence on matters of politics, economy, health and education both nationally and internationally was coming to the surface. While religion claims an important legacy in issues such as political movements or genocide – from Gandhi's nonviolent independence movement to the Rwanda genocide – the recent revolutions in Islamic countries as well as the terrorism acts associated with extremists of religious denominations became an increasingly relevant and dominant focus of current public dialogue.

The trends of a new digital journalism and a growing awareness of religions' importance will coincide in this scholarship as each transition ultimately poses unique

challenges for the field of religion journalism. Historically relegated to fluff feature stories or traditional "church pages" in Sunday newspapers, religion reporting is garnering attention as a serious topic of coverage as faith's influence on politics, economy, health and education is recognized. On the other hand, one such outcome ushered by the digital age of journalism has been the rise of multimedia as a form of storytelling. Multimedia, as defined by Thornburg (2011), is "the use of more than one technique (text, audio, still images, moving images) to tell a single story" (p. 8). However, gathering this sensory-rich material is something journalists are negotiating as media routines and journalism-source boundaries are redefined. Multimedia requires new barriers to be transcended as journalists obtain intimate details that will embolden a visual story. As a result, utilizing multimedia on the religion beat, an area wrought with privacy, sanctity and strict doctrine, may pose difficult challenges for maintaining religion as a competitive story that audiences will pursue in a market dominated by multimedia storytelling. In addition, the intimate and fervent nature of much religious practice may leave religion journalism vulnerable to sensationalized reporting when seeking coverage that engages all senses.

In this scholarship, religion includes personal belief, behavior, community and even feelings that underpin the way life is interpreted. Ultimately, the religious, spiritual and sacred allow religion news to consist of anything from individual houses of worship, denominations or entire religions to politics, sports, business, education, crime, arts and entertainment or science (Connolly 2006). Even secularly, religion is a

lens for understanding reality; it is a system of values, culture and history that has a hand in governing everyday life.

The state of religion coverage and its readership continue to grow and change. In the 1960s, religion news audiences tended to be older, female, highly religious and conservative in comparison with nonreaders, according to a study conducted by the Newspaper Publishers Association (Buddenbaum 107). More recently, according to Connolly (2006), six of ten Americans think religion is very important in their lives, while the Pew Forum's most recent U.S. Religious Landscape Survey (2007) found that only 16.1 percent of Americans over the age of 18 were religiously unaffiliated – only 1.6% of those people identifying as atheists. Moreover, not only do approximately 80 percent of Americans ascribe to a particular denomination (The Pew Forum 2008), but more Americans worship each weekend than attend all the sporting events held in the United States in an entire week, according to former AP religion writer George Cornell (Buddenbaum 1998). Ultimately, if religion reporting does not keep up with new multimedia methods of storytelling or if these tools hamper the telling of an accurate, clear religion story, a large readership demographic will be neglected. Even from a purely financial standpoint, such an outcome would be detrimental.

My own interest in religion and journalism is a hybrid of all of the religion narratives prominent in media reporting – religion as international and controversial as well as personal and multifaceted. I came to see religion as something serious and hard-hitting in the intimacy of a college freshman Religious Dialogues course in the

foothills of rural Appalachia. However, I did not comprehend the personal beliefs, behaviors, communities, or emotions that religion affects until standing on a sun-beaten road in Jerusalem near a two-thousand-year-old olive tree with the Muslim call to pray echoing against the city's sandstone walls. It was also in Israel where I fell in love with the idea of a visual story; one that, in this holy land, was predominantly religious. Unbeknownst to me, my professional project was born then from those smells, colors and sounds of the Mediterranean of which I could not get enough. Religion has become both a significant scholarly and practical aspect of my life – the reason it has come to be my thesis topic. But the tradition of oral stories at a pulpit, intricate stained-glass windows, heavy incense and saintly relics that I grew up with in the Catholic Church has undoubtedly played a hand in my interest in multimedia – perhaps one of best tools journalists have for capturing these ritual experiences the way that believers encounter them.

As a result, this professional project will be used to set the groundwork for my own religion reporting through a hyperlocal, nonsectarian religion news website tailored to a student audience (http://athensbeyondbelief.wordpress.com). As a college town, Athens is teeming with religious life, spiritual exploration and ritual traditions. However, to date the community lacks a media outlet documenting these experiences with a mind toward issues of faith and belief systems. While local online and print publications currently satisfy interests in such niche topics as politics, environmental issues, technology and women's issues, religion, spirituality and faith remain uncharted. As a result, my project attempts to find a home for such reporting in a

community where I have personally witnessed vibrant faith and spirituality. For the

young, technologically savvy readership base in Athens, it will be especially important

to embrace a multimedia platform – particularly when approaching a subject that some

young adults may preconceive as archaic or predictable. The hyperlocal religion news

site will strive to tell stories using at least one medium, whether audio, photographs,

hyperlinks, video, infographics or interactive graphics, in addition to written content.

     To lay the proper foundation for such a professional project, the first chapter of

this scholarly essay defines religion journalism by tracking its historical development,

explores the mechanisms that influence contemporary religion coverage, shares a

compilation of 14 interviews with religion journalists at secular media outlets about

the current state of religion journalism and multimedia, and examines the nature of

multimedia reporting as it can be applied to religion. The second chapter reflects on

the ways in which my practical religion reporting experience was informed by

scholarship and examines the experience of conceptualizing and producing a

hyperlocal nonsectarian religion news site with multimedia feature stories.

     Entitled *Beyond Belief*, this news site will seek to provide monthly

nondenominational religion, spiritual, faith and values coverage to promote awareness

and tolerance amongst its primary audience: Ohio University students. As I move

forward with a career in communicating religion – whether through journalism,

nonprofit or policy work – this scholarly background as well as the practical

experience of sharing intimate, sacred faith and belief stories will be invaluable.

As a scholar and practitioner, I am approaching this subject with a month's worth of experience working at the Religion Newswriters Association (RNA) in Columbia, Missouri. Its mission is to foster a community of professionals dedicated to improving the comprehension of religion within public discourse. Working under Dr. Debra Mason at the RNA located at the University of Missouri during summer 2013, I arrived with particular questions about religion journalism that included: How do you tell an important story about a phenomenon whose tenants are personal and unverifiable? How are reporters using technological advances in audio, video and visualization to tell an archaic story of things unseen, laden with ritual and intimacy? I assumed that religion journalism is a particularly difficult subject to portray with multimedia because I thought that religious beliefs, the intimate nature of religion, and religious institutions themselves would restrict the ability to document stories through multimedia. Through the course of my professional project I will share the reasons why my initial assumptions were incorrect.

CHAPTER ONE

Overview of Religion Journalism (1700-2000)

Religion, as defined by Johnstone (2001) is "a system of beliefs and practices by which a group of people interpret and respond to what they feel is sacred and usually supernatural" (as quoted in Stout 2012, p. 3). Moreover, it is important to distinguish the difference between *religion journalism* – objective secular treatments of church – and *religious journalism* – theologically based media content (Stout 2012), such as *Christianity Today* or the *Jewish Press*. While this scholarship specifically distinguishes a concern with religion journalism, as opposed to religious journalism, this is not to say that religious outlets are not reliable sources of information or that they have not provided significant breaking news to audiences that secular news publications missed. As Stout (2012) explained, major church denominations founded by the 1940s were instrumental in covering initially unreported stories such as the Civil Rights movement, the AIDS crisis and worldwide disaster relief. In one instance, it was religious activists – both Jewish and Christian – long before the genocides in Darfur, Sudan, who were largely responsible for trying to publicize the nature of the Khartoum regime (Hertzke 2009).

Throughout mass communication's history, it was not always possible to distinguish between religion and religious news. Even the origin of the word "gospel," comes from the old English term "godspell" or good news (Stout 2012, p. 98). Similarly, significant advancements in media and public dissemination of information, such as the printing press, have been intricately related to religious movements such as

the Reformation. While these intertwining forms of religion and journalism are not the traditional roles we imagine each to play in present-day society, they mark a longstanding connection. Underwood (2002) asserted, "Journalists today seldom recognize that the prophetic impulse to protest injustice and to root out corruption…still rests…in the modern journalistic commitment to social justice and reform" (p. 20).

In more recent history, early American journalism was owned by publishers and editors of faith so that most journalism available was essentially religious. Ultimately, "while newspapers of the 18th century were a blend of religious and nonreligious content, they advocated righteous living and devotion to deity" (Stout, p. 99). As a result, while all journalism was presented with the purpose of being informative, much of it was also meant to promote pious religious values. Only when journalism became more of a business and less of a source of political and religious activism in the 1830s did religious and religion journalism become more distinct. However, even as journalism began to form a separate identity outside of religion, particularly during the rise of the penny press, faith was still deemed a significant story. Publisher James Gordon Bennett Sr. of the *New York Herald* was one of the first media leaders of that era who treated religion as a worthy topic for coverage just as much as crime or entertainment (Stout 2012). Moreover, Bennett was unique in comparison with former newspaper editors in that he did not uphold any religion or even the institution of religion. While Bennett continued to pursue religion stories in his papers, it was not until the mid-1860s that evangelical preachers such as D.L.

Moody galvanized reporters illustrating "a major shift in the way religion was depicted by the press; it represented an early manifestation of sensational news designed to engross and captivate" (p. 100).

The religion beat has continued to wax and wane throughout history depending on the cultural concerns of the period. During the 1934 National Conference of Christians and Jews, for instance, the members established the Religion News Service in hopes of increasing the limited scope of religion coverage. On the other hand, in the mid-1970s with the rise of Ayatolleh Ruhlloah Khomeini in Iran and the presidential election of born-again Christian Jimmy Carter, religion was an aspect of public debate. What did not appear to change as steadily over time was the medium through which religion news was reported – predominantly newspapers. Buddenbaum (1998) noted that broadcast journalists were much slower to recognize religion as news than were their counterparts in print media.

More recent studies have illustrated similar trends. While over a decade old, the Freedom Forum's *Bridging the Gap* study provides insight into the media landscape in which religion journalism was present during the 1990s. While primarily concerned with newspapers, the study reported the results from a multi-page survey that was mailed to 1,436 daily newspaper publishers and examined the secular religion reporting industry as a whole, noting a minimal presence both on TV and online. At the time this study was originally released in 1993, only two serious religion media contenders existed on television for a national secular audience – PBS with Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly and ABC with one full time religion reporter. Moreover, Peggy

Wehmeyer of Dallas' Channel 8, WFAA-TV, held the distinction of being the nation's only local television religion reporter during the 1980s, while CNN announced a goal to integrate more religion stories into its broadcasts. However, with limited resources and attention devoted to serious religion coverage, the study noted, "Television news especially tends to limit itself to stories with colorful pageantry or dramatic religious strife" (p. 25) – reporting that is often simplistic or polarizing. This study, along with two articles published in Nieman Reports and *The Quill*, "God in the Newsroom" and "Religion in the news: Are we short-changing readers and ourselves with biases that filter news?" respectively, marked a period of change for the beat in fall of 1993, when religion was being recognized as an erupting, growing and steadily significant topic, as opposed to a subject merely prey to "the cyclical rise and fall of journalistic interest" (Vultee 2010, p. 151). The economic prosperity during the period worked in favor of the religion beat, allotting resources to revisit the subject.

Despite these improvements in financial resources, on the whole the issue of religion coverage quality has been controversial throughout the course of established religion reporting in secular publications. Aspects of this controversy will be described later in this scholarly essay, however, what is certain is that for the percent of news devoted to religion – 0.8 percent, the same as the percentages recorded on issues covering education or immigration (The Pew Forum 2009) – a large portion of it is not covered by religion journalists, who served as specialists on the topic. While the Freedom Forum's study found 92 full-time religion reporters and 163 part-time religion reporters among the newspapers that responded to a study in 2000

(approximately 21% of all U.S. newspapers), such reporters with specialized

knowledge and experience were still outsiders to the majority of the faiths they

covered. For journalists particularly unaccustomed to the beat, the fading of religious

language in society, the increased chance of offending religious sensibilities with

growing religious pluralism in the U.S., and the growing unfamiliarity of the public

with Biblical allusions and spiritual metaphors helpful in telling a story, can make the

God-beat daunting (Dart 2000).

Constructing Religion Coverage

The factors that influence news content may offer insight into why the religion

beat has garnered poor

or limited coverage.

Shoemaker and Reese's

(1991) model for media

content, best understood as

a bull's eye with multiple

levels of influence, can be

used as one way of

interpreting how religion

may be marginalized as a

beat.

Figure 1

Shoemaker and Reese's Hierarchy of Influences Model (1991)
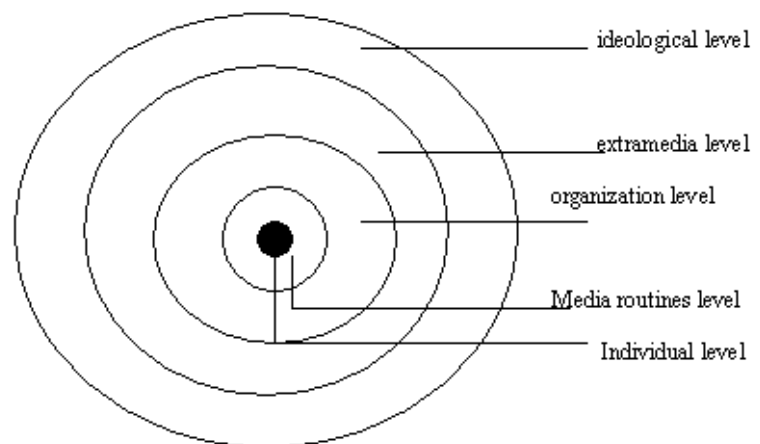
In the outer fringes, news content is filtered through societal ideology as media

endeavor to uphold the status quo and cultural boundaries. This level of influence may

impose exclusion for less-prevalent religious denominations or religion in general. As

Shoemaker and Reese explained, in the United States "the [belief] system is

intertwined with the Protestant ethic and the value of individual achievement," as well

as economic values such as capitalism and free market business (p. 148). With news

content tailored to fit societal norms, as well its tendency to portray deviant people or

events through stereotypes, it can be predicted that faith outside of traditional Judeo-

Christian dogma, including non-mainline Christian traditions, or beliefs critical of

American individualism may be marginalized or underreported, as these religious

values lie outside of societal norms. Such is often the case for the Pentecostal serpent

handling traditions of Appalachia, deemed deviant news both due to the physical act

of picking up snakes within religious worship and the unique extreme of rural

economic depravity visible in Appalachia. As Howard Dorgan (2005), an Appalachian

religious ethnographer explained, "The national media had devoted a disproportionate

degree of attention to this one Appalachian religious phenomenon, with the

consequence that many outside observers seemed to believe that this practice was the

religious norm in central Appalachia" (p. 187). In actuality, not only is this practice far

less prevalent, but also it is not geographically limited with serpent handling

fellowships as far as the lower and upper Midwest, as well as the Middle and Deep

South. In addition, according to the 2008 Pew Research Religion & Public Life

Project's Religious Landscape Survey, among adults, Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhist,

Orthodox Christians (both Greek and Russia) represent 0.6-0.7 percent of the

population each, while Muslims represent approximately 0.6 percent. Yet,

comparatively speaking there is far more media coverage given to Islam than to each of these religious groups individually and likely to them combined.

Religion coverage is affected greatly by Shoemaker and Reese's interior level of media content influence: media routine. Journalists utilize media routines not necessarily to find better stories, but ultimately to obtain a standard of objectivity in which they can defend their work from criticism and remain consistent with competing news outlets. Moreover, these routines allow for cheaper and faster production. Typical channels that appeal to news producers fit under "an unambiguous news event model" and may include official proceedings, press releases, press conferences and nonspontaneous events (Shoemaker, p. 100). For religion stories to meet news values of impact, conflict, novelty, prominence, proximity and timeliness, much more time and many more resources are required as many important religion topics are not event-oriented (Brooks 2002). Ultimately, as Shoemaker and Reese asserted, "to retain credibility, the media must, after all, not stray too far from what the public knows is happening" and for religions as diverse as those found in the United States, time and ingenuity are required to instill interest, prominence and understanding for uninformed readers (p. 195). Once more, it is important to note that religion's battle for newsworthiness becomes even worse as media outlets – particularly newspapers – struggle to preserve funds. This process often means resorting to more pre-planned stories, stories told without reporters, and reliance on purchased supplemental program material. Dissimilar to major corporations or political groups, religious institutions less commonly have public relations advocates

who can compete with other packaged stories. Limited by space and time deadlines –
typically within work hours and workdays, traditional religious worship does not fit
standard journalistic routines of coverage (Shoemaker 1991).

Shoemaker and Reese's model provides one final relevant element of influence
– the individual journalist. Assessing the influence of a specific journalist is integrally
related to understanding the typical journalist's background. While one account noted
"charges that mass communicators are politically liberal, antireligious and unlike
'most Americans' have been common in the [1990s]" when Shoemaker and Reese's
work was published (p. 65), most of the studies they cited, particularly concerning a
typical journalist's religious background, were conflicting. While Olasky (1988)
claimed that modern journalists have been "influenced by anti-Christian humanism
and pantheism [and have] abandoned their Christian heritage," other reports found that
journalists had comparable religious backgrounds to the American population (as
quoted in Shoemaker 1991, p. 68). Shoemaker and Reese concluded that it is unclear
how personal attitudes, values and beliefs play into media content.

One study, conducted by Schmalzbauer (2005), attempted to illuminate this
issue by analyzing the news stories and columns produced by 20 Catholic and
evangelical journalists, assessing the influence of religion on these reporters.
Schmalzbauer described that like many journalists who manage the influence of
multiple personal identities on their work, "Catholics and evangelicals [journalists]
have brought their religious commitment into American journalism through the
storylines of culture wars and cultural consensus" (p. 26), reflecting the contrasting

religious imaginations of "Protestant individualism" and Catholic "communitarian orientation" within these religious traditions (p. 24). While Schmalzbauer's research represents only a small sampling of reporters who identify with two particular religious denominations, his findings allude to the very direct ways religious tradition has informed the story framing tendencies of the Catholic and evangelical religion journalists in his sample.

Shoemaker and Reese also discussed that the personal identity of reporters may influence content when considering that different subjects required different kinds of journalists in the reporting process. Specifically, technical beats call for older and/or better-educated journalists who may relate to their personal background and values differently, perhaps less biasedly, as they treat their subject as a discipline of scholarship. While it remains to be seen whether religion could be considered a technical beat similar to science or economics, what is clear is that rigorous religion reporting involves knowledge of immense jargon, religious ritual and history, as well as requires the skills and expertise comparable to that of a technical writer.

As an alternative to the Shoemaker and Reese model, religion media scholar Mark Silk (1995) proposed a paradigm for media content and framing choices that heavily relies on just two of Shoemaker and Reese's levels of influence – societal ideology and journalist as final gatekeeper. Silk operates under the assumption that religion reporters do not necessarily make content decisions by relying on their personal religious traditions. Instead they are guided by the collective ideologies of their society, and their understanding of it, which may, however, necessarily be

affected by their own religious experience. Silk takes into consideration the tension between conversion and adhesion that religion in the public sphere occupies. Within this tension, reporters lean toward adhesion – generally aiming to appease the largest audience as possible. Ultimately Silk argued, "When the news media set out to represent religion, they do not approach it from the standpoint of the secular confronting the sacred. They are operating with ideas of what religion is and is not, of what it ought and ought not be" in which he identifies seven "topoi" (singular: topos) or "commonplace stock frames" in which religion stores fit (p. 55).

Silk acknowledged that topoi, which typically reflect society's moral attention at a given time, shift as attitudes and laws evolve. However, for the purpose of his research, supported by historical observations of what religion reporting has looked like throughout the last few centuries, Silk identified the following topoi: good works, tolerance, hypocrisy, false prophecy, inclusion, supernatural belief and declension (p. 55). Silk attributes the underlying similarity among all of these frames to the notion that religion reporting is "establishmentarian," meaning its role is to uphold and affirm the status quo on collective beliefs on religion, similar to Shoemaker and Reese's description of the outer level of their bull's eye model – societal ideology. Silk asserted that "news media, far from promoting a secularist agenda of their own, approach religion with values and presuppositions that the American public widely shares" (p. 141). Moreover, Silk argued that contrary to popular criticism "not only is American journalism reasonably attentive to matters of faith, but it also approaches these in what can only be described as a pro-religious posture" (p. 148). While such a

notion seems conflicting to some of the literature presented in this scholarly essay, the meaning of Silk's proposition is clear – when reporters cover religion stories, rarely is it the case that they write to undermine or question the entire institution of religion and faith. To the contrary, reporters allow religion and religious experience a certain validity. For example, the focus of good works or cults coverage is much less likely to question the fundamental legitimacy (whether good works are actually positive or cults negative, for instance) of these institutions as it is to report how these particular experiences of good works or cult practices affirm or deviate from the collective understanding of religion, respectively.

Silk's research offered general definitions and historical examples of the topoi he identified, highlighting the ways religion stories suit these frames. Within the topos of good works, Silk noted that journalists report on the generally held belief that religion is expected to do good things. From such a belief such stores as charity during the holidays, church aid during national disasters and the shortcomings of a local religious institution in the face of poverty or homelessness are developed.

In terms of the topos of tolerance, Silk highlighted the intersection between religion and politics, particularly during presidential elections. During election season, it is commonplace for media to analyze the ways in which a candidate's religious belief will affect his or her leadership abilities. As was witnessed during the 2008 presidential elections, candidate Barrack Obama's religious affiliation was a reoccurring topic in the media – with speculations of Muslim Obama flying. A similar treatment of concern was present for media portrayals of 2012 Republican presidential

candidate and active Mormon Mit Romney. Moreover, some stories expose the

political assertions of religious identities, with tones fluctuating from critical to

congratulatory "depending on whether the clergy 'was enlightened enough to agree

with us [the media]," evoking Shoemaker and Reese's entire paradigm for influences

on media content (p. 72).

Both historically and more recently, the hypocrisy topos can be associated with

financial or moral scandal, from allegations of adultery by preachers such as Henry

Ward Beecher, to the sexual abuse by Catholic Church clergy. However, while this

topos generally consumes itself with the wrongdoings of major denominations (where

the public sphere is generally aware of the moral expectations these believers hold

themselves to), the topos of false prophecy often consist of marginal religious groups

– from the Church of Scientology to Hare Krishna communities. In light of this

tendency, Silk noted, "we don't talk about Christianity as a religion of violence

because there's a crazy man in Waco" (p. 102). In other words, while Silk asserted

that his goal is not necessarily to offer value judgment as to whether operating under

topos is good or bad, one such shortcoming he did note is that marginal religions are

often scapegoated and cast as the deviant outliers of religion, and in the process, leave

more mainstream belief systems entirely out of the spotlight of investigation.

Silk defined the topos of inclusion as the tendency in which a "suspect faith

[is] shown to be composed of good Americans worshipping according to their own

worthy lights" (p. 106). Where such reports used to focus on Judaism or Mormonism,

Silk, even 20 years ago, tracked a new trend moving toward the inclusion reporting of Islam – journalism work that still ebbs and flows today.

Likely Silk's most outlying topos, supernatural belief, was characterized by Silk as a subject predominantly covered in tabloids, but nevertheless covered in great frequency in this medium. Silk went on to question, "Do [reputable news organizations] shun reporting supernatural phenomena, and, if so, is it because the phenomena fail to meet standards of empirical proof or because the journalists inhabit a culture of disbelief?" (p.128). While Silk did not provide an answer, he directed us toward the notion that private miracles are personal, subjective experiences, situations in which it is difficult to craft a typical two-sided argument, or to understand the role journalists plays if they themselves see a miracle – questionably transporting them out of the objective role of observer.

Finally, Silk highlighted the topos of declension, one that will be of increasing importance as religion has grown to be more "fragmented, personalistic, and antinomian," a trend Silk had already identified in this 1995 work (p. 146). Declension, or a condition of moral deterioration, has been used as a frame for stories such as the move of mega-churches toward a more consumer-minded mentality of attracting worshippers, or stories pertaining to religion surveys (such as those provided by the Pew Research Center for Religion and Public Life) on demographics of believers. Ultimately, Silk asserted that "religion in America is characterized by nothing if not persistent experimentation and, as *Life* [magazine] suggested, a succession of shifts of spiritual allegiances" (p. 138). As a result, Silk asserted his

belief that the religion beat will "grow more thematic, issue-oriented, and trend-seeking" making it particularly imperative to recognize how topos are growing and changing and therefore affecting the nature of religion media content. However, nearly a decade later Underwood (2002) separated religion reporting in two, largely event-based categories, what is controversial and what is sensational.

Religion content in secular media is influenced by a number of factors, including many influences that affect all media, as Reese and Shoemaker suggested, as well as the common frames journalists become comfortable with within the religion beat, as Silk described them. While these forces can serve to be both beneficial and detrimental to high quality religion reporting, the comprehensive Freedom Forum's *Bridging the Gap* study identified unique qualities to the religion beat that engender "shoddy, simplistic reporting" (Dart 2000, p. i). While this study is more than a decade old, it does offer insight on the nature of the religion beat and the difficulty it creates for reporters.

First, aspects of religion journalism are at odds with natural tendencies of reporting as "reporters and editors value clarity, reason, facts, and egalitarian ideals" (p. 33). On the other hand, religion is not only "subjective, intuitive, and unverifiable in ordinary ways" (p. 33), but also "religious people, whose vocabularies are totally subjective and whose experiences are uniquely personal, are the subjects of reportage by the uninitiated" (p. 60). In additional to these challenges, the study cited reoccurring criticism of journalists including the fact that religious leaders expect reporting to look like endorsement, and when it does not, many are unsatisfied. While

religious leaders very often complain of "secular bias" that takes a critical stance against matters of faith, reporters claim they are simply being objective. However, in response to such criticism Vultee (2010) hypothesized that "perhaps efforts to avoid negative coverage have had the consequence, intended or not, of making a newspaper's religion/faith/values section the space in which people are simply 'nice,' in whatever form that takes," championing fluffy feature stories over serious reporting (p. 160). Additionally, when pursuing more substantive stories, religious leaders are not always accessible for questioning, a complaint noted by the Freedom Forum's study, and echoed by Silk. As he explained, within the tradition of some religious denominations, there is a longstanding history in the church of support of cover-ups, as uncovering and promoting sin is considered to be the devil's work. (Silk 1995, p. 7).

Other fundamental beliefs within religious traditions can make reporting difficult. Stability, permanence and unchanging routines are often revered qualities within religious institutions, creating a predictability and stability that can be challenging for a journalist to make newsworthy (Dart 2000). The problem is compounded by the fact that many newspapers do not have a full-time person responsible for keeping up with trends or vernacular, and religious leaders are reluctant to speak with reporters who are largely ignorant. As a result, most criticisms of the religion beat ultimately pertain to its absence, as religion reporting is not as well established as other specialty beats including education, science, health and business.

An Update on the Religion Beat

While scholarship has provided an important foundation for understanding secular religion reporting, ultimately, most of the foundational texts written on the subject are outdated, especially considering the advent of multimedia reporting. Some of the most seminal works about the God-beat, including Buddenbaum's *Reporting News about Religion: An Introduction for Journalists* and Silk's *Unsecular Media: Making News of Religion in America*, are more than 15 years old. A few of the most recent and relevant texts to the constructs of this professional project include Stout's *Media and Religion: Foundations of an Emerging Field* (2012), which provides only a limited glimpse into the realm of religion reporting, as the work pertains largely to technological advances in the religion-media interface, including religious media and entertainment.

Additionally, Vultee's "Faith and Values: Journalism and the Critique of Religion Coverage of the 1990s" published in the *Journal of Media and Religion* (2010) overlaps in research literature with this scholarly essay as the article attempts to track the changing identity of religion news between two metropolitan newspapers between 1992 and 2000. However, this study neglects to address multimedia and changes in the mediums used to report on religion – including television, radio, online, and multimedia-focused sites – which this essay attempts to include more comprehensively. This gap in scholarship, particularly concerning multi-platform reporting on religion, in conjunction with new economic pressures on newspapers, encouraged me to conduct interviews directly with journalists in the field (See Table

1). Not only was it imperative to conduct this research with newspaper journalists – the area in which most prior research was conducted – but with representatives from broadcast, radio, news services as well as local, national, and international media sources who are all moving to produce online content that embraces multimedia reporting.

The initiative began small. During my internship at the Religion Newswriters Association, I planned to speak with the executive director of the association, Dr. Debra Mason, and a few recommended contacts. However, through the resources of the RNA and the sources I contacted through my initial discussion with Dr. Mason, my hope of getting a small, current glimpse into the field transformed into 14 in-depth interviews with religion reporters around the country and world. The insight collected has been fairly comprehensive of the beat, including interviews with major metropolitan papers such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, exclusively online-based media such as the *Huffington Post*, national and international broadcast outlets such as PBS's *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly* and *Voice of America*, international newswires such as Reuters, and hyperlocal community websites such as Columbia, Missouri's *Columbia Faith and Values*.

The reporters with whom I spoke were just as diverse as the media outlets they represented. From seasoned journalists with more than 35 years on the religion beat to newcomers with only two and a half years' experience, these journalists represented a wide range of perspectives, geographic areas, ages and media backgrounds – including

Table 1

Religion Journalists Qualitative Interview Catalogue

Name	Media Affiliation
Sarah Pulliam Bailey	Religion News Service
Manya Brachear	*Chicago Tribune*
Tony Carnes	A Journey Through NYC Religions
David Gibson	Religion News Service
Laurie Goodstein	*New York Times*
Tom Heneghan	Reuters
Jaweed Kaleem	*The Huffington Post*
Kellie Kotraba	Columbia FAVs
Kim Lawton	*Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly*
Debra Mason	Center for Religion and the Professions Religion Newswriters Association
Ann Rodgers	*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*
Bob Smietana	*The Tennessean*
Jerome Socolovsky	*Voice of America*
Elizabeth Tenety	*Washington Post*

print, radio, television and online. Each interview typically lasted 30 minutes, but a few went well over an hour.

Formal IRB permission was obtained for these interviews, and while my main goal was to fill the gaps in scholarship on multimedia within religion reporting, I also took this opportunity to formulate an updated sense of the beat. The interviews relied primarily on nine questions presented below. While all nine were not always asked in every interview, and interviews varied depending on the experience of the journalist with multimedia or the natural flow of the conversation, three primary topics – content in religion reporting, technology's effect on the beat, and religion's relationship to multimedia – were consistently touched upon. The following questions encompassed the core of my inquiry:

1. How do you begin to find a religion story targeted toward a secular audience?
2. How are trends in reporting religion changing?
3. Have you observed a disparity between multimedia in religion reporting in comparison to other beats?
4. How is technology changing the way you might report a story covering a religious topic?
5. Have you integrated multimedia storytelling techniques into your stories concerning religious topics?
6. How might multimedia hinder the clarity of telling religion stories?
7. How might multimedia aid in the telling of religion stories?
8. How do you see the role of multimedia storytelling affecting the future of religion reporting?
9. How have religious institutions or individuals responded to uses of video/audio recording devices, photography, or the creation of interactive graphics for the purpose of telling multimedia religion stories?

After completing and transcribing each interview, responses from each journalist were categorized within one of the three subjects: religion news content, technological advances, and religion and multimedia. Once grouped, I compared and contrasted the

comments provided, particularly compiling any direct statements that appeared to summarize a common trend or deviate from the typical reflection on the given subject. It is important to note, because many of the journalists interviewed underwent career transitions in the field of journalism – altering geographical location, audience size, or even medium – these characteristics were not used to distinguish or separate reflections about the religion beat. Instead, this analysis made the assumption that as all media sources move toward an online presence where audiences are more overlapping, the insight each journalist offered was largely reflective and/or took into consideration the entire religion journalism field as a whole – not just his or her particular experience in a set geography, medium or audience. Such a frame of mind was encouraged in each interview, particularly when speaking on technological advances and multimedia, as interviewees were asked to reflect on the religion beat as a whole, under the assumption that reporters on the religion beat are likely also some of the beat's most consistent connoisseurs of all types of coverage. Only when a reporter's unique circumstance on the beat was emphasized or when a characteristic of his or her reporting made him or her a significant outlier to the group (for instance, Tom Heneghan the only foreign correspondent and interviewee headquartered outside of the United States) was this uniqueness highlighted and analyzed.

Religion Content

Used to begin each interview, religion content – how it is discerned and obtained, as well as how it has undergoing change through time – is an apt place to start in this analysis. As is to be expected, the seven topoi of Silk's *Unsecular Media*

were not a conscious part of the discernment process as the reporters interviewed

pursued religion stories. Instead, when asked how each interviewee found a religion

story, reporters answered unanimously that the bigger issue was sifting through the

mass of ideas, topics and angles that could fall under the realm of religion coverage,

more likely emphasizing the topics great diversity. "I almost feel bad for colleagues on

other beats," said *Religion News Service* reporter David Gibson (personal

communication, June 5, 2013). "They have to cover the horse race of politics or the

state utility board, or this aspect of one deed or another. Religion reporting really has

no boundaries."

Nevertheless, in an attempt to appeal to as diverse an audience as possible,

many journalists categorized their approach as looking for intersections between

religion and something else, whether it is education, business, politics, science or

popular culture. The intersection is important because, as *Chicago Tribune* religion

reporter Manya Brachear said, a story needs to have a large scope so that no matter

what religion a reader identifies with, he or she can connect with the story. One

example of this for Brachear was the profile of a local rabbi struggling with a

gambling addiction, a topic she felt could resonate with the large population of

Americans who suffer from addiction (personal communication, September 26, 2013).

Another means by which journalists undertook the discernment process was

through "trying to figure out the common human experience," said *Tennessean*

religion reporter Bob Smietana (personal communication, June 18, 2013). Often times,

he said, there is a lot about life, death, poverty, grieving and other sociological

experiences on the beat that all humans can relate to, regardless of whether they are religious. Nevertheless, religion coverage is unique in that "journalists who cover religion news… must write stories that work on two levels: they must be accessible to general readers yet accurate enough to pass muster with clergy, scholars and devout believers" (Mattingly 2009, pp.148). Jaweed Kaleem at the *Huffington Post* mirrored these sentiments, recognizing that while relating to a larger audience is important, there is a population of readers who are religious people looking for deep theological debate. As a result, he strives to have content that meet this need for more specialized, in-depth coverage.

Additionally, the demographics of a particular city or geographic area can also play into the type of coverage that is demeaned more relevant or necessary, which religion reporter Ann Rodgers of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* noted in terms of the Catholic coverage in predominately Catholic western Pennsylvania (personal communication, September 20, 2013). Nevertheless, this did not exclude the fact that some reporters have made one story a priority over another because of the news value of novelty. Brachear described her decision to cover the second chance given to a Ukrainian Catholic school when other Catholics schools where getting shut down as stemming from a particular opportunity to "introduce this religious tradition to our readers" (personal communication, September 26, 2013).

When the subject did arise about how a journalist's personal beliefs might shape the stories covered, most journalists reflected that the responsibility to remain objective within the religion beat is no different or more difficult than a political

reporter remaining nonpartisan. One interesting addition to this notion was Gibson's

reflection that often the biggest danger comes when people report on their own

religion, because in such cases it is easier for reporters to assume they know what they

are talking about. On the other hand, "when it is a different theology, I am going to

make sure I get it right and that I don't assume I know something," he said (personal

communication, June 5, 2013).

One additional, unique element that was brought up in terms of pursuing

content for the religion beat is that often sources are less experienced with media

relations than most other sources whom reporters approach. Laurie Goodstein, religion

reporter at the *New York Times*, depicted the scenario well:

> I think there are certain challenges that are not necessarily the case
> in other beats in so far as often you are covering people of good
> will that are strong believers in whatever they are doing or
> promoting. You are not there to advance their beliefs or faith, you
> are there to cover it dispassionately…[H]aving them understand
> that is often a challenge. (personal communication, September 18,
> 2013)

Generally speaking, religion reporting was described as having similar

expectations as those of any other beat, except that the scope of content is wider. Some

commonly mentioned trends in the beat in the last decade included the

acknowledgement that many religious institutions are splintering into smaller

identities, often making it more difficult for religion journalists to cover the diverse

array of denominations. In addition a separate trend denoted was the record numbers

of believers categorized as "nones," lacking an official religious affiliation, as religion

journalists were challenged to represent this growing representation outside of the

framework of any specific religious tradition. This phenomenon, Goodstein explained, has caused her to see fewer reporters attending local church conventions or annual national conferences such as those of the United Methodist, Episcopal, or Catholic Church, which would provide stories pertinent only to members of a particular faith (personal communication, September 18, 2013). Nevertheless, a general take away from these 14 interviews was that, like any other beat, religion reporters are mindful of their audience, connected to a network of religious leaders, social groups and institutions in their field, and seek objectivity and understanding.

Technological Advances

In progressing toward the topic of multimedia, I discussed with each journalist the role technological advances have played in the last decade of his or her reporting. On the whole, I received a sense that most updates in technology mentioned – from the ability to do research online to the story ideas presented by social media outlets such as Twitter and Facebook – are representative of journalism as a whole, and were not reflective of the religion beat specifically. One interesting trend observed throughout the course of these interviews was the scope to which each journalist could attest to technological changes. While younger journalists relayed their experience of now using Twitter to collect story ideas and to find sources or using an iPad to obtain video and audio for a story, more experienced journalists looked back to when preparing for an interview meant going to a library or diligently creating a personal archive of religion content and contacts. As a foreign correspondent headquartered in France, Tom Heneghan, religion reporter with Reuters, remembered a time when

traveling to cover a story in the Balkan states meant lugging hundreds of research documents, contact forms and maps (personal communication, June 5, 2013) Though this experience is not representative of the group, it does illustrate the care and foresight required on the beat at a time when background information was not close at hand.

The technological changes that appeared to be more pertinent – though not unique – to religion journalism include the freedom of people to publish their opinions, framed as truth, in a more prominent public sphere online. Additionally, as with all niche beats, religion journalism is not robustly staffed and has fewer resources, leaving few specialized journalists in the field. Some reporters are concerned that this process is compromising the expertise of the beat. As PBS *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly* broadcaster Kim Lawton shared, "I am very concerned that so much that passes as religion reporting these days is, in fact, opinion and analysis, not reporting" (personal communication, June 13, 2013). Religion reporter with the *Washington Post*'s religion website *On Faith,* Elizabeth Tenety echoed similar concerns: "I frankly feel that the Internet is rewarding sensational religion coverage [that plays] into the lowest-basis instincts within people to make fun of each other, and to make fun of people they disagree with" (personal communication, June 25, 2013).

Despite these potential hindrances to the quality of religion journalism, one notable attribute that technological advances have allowed is the ability to prove that religion content is popular. As Mason explained, many online outlets "have concluded

that religion is popular as a topic for audiences and the one thing that has helped the beat in recent years is that for the first time we do know what people are reading. We never knew this before with newspapers" (personal communication, June 11, 2013). Editors and producers are now able to obtain good data on what stories have traction with their readers by recording unique visits to news story pages. Often, it is religion topics that prove to be trending stories. Mason and other journalists in the field expressed that this was the first step in combating any potential decline of religion journalism associated with the fall of newspapers.

Religion in Multimedia

The direction of each interview was ultimately geared toward the main focus of my project, the presence of multimedia in the religion beat today. While not every religion reporter had experience working with multimedia, or felt comfortable enough with the experience to speak authoritatively on the topic, all journalists offered, at the very least, some general trends and personal observations on the diversity of mediums that can be used to report on religion stories.

Approaching the subject of religion journalism and multimedia, I carried the specific assumption that religion is a sacred and intimate experience and is largely expressed in traditional, private and conservative spaces. As reporter Jerome Socolovsky of *Voice of America* described, "For many religious traditions, the idea of scared space involves having no video recording or electronics or having a certain degree of privacy" (personal communication, October 28, 2013). As a result, my postulate built on this assumption was that reporters on the religion beat would have a

more difficult time utilizing multimedia because of limited access to their subject

matter in comparison to other beats. While many journalists affirmed my assumption

about the nature of religion, my assumption was largely wrong – though interesting

contradictions did emerge.

When asked if journalists felt that religion stories had less, comparable, or

more multimedia elements to their stories when compared with other news stories, 12

of the 14 journalists interviewed said that they had observed the mix to be comparable

to other niche beats. The two journalists who noted that religion journalism may be at

a slight disadvantage in comparison to other beats, Sarah Pulliam Bailey and David

Gibson of Religion News Service, voiced concerns not with access, but with the fact

that some religious topics, such as theological debates or clergy changes, are not easily

visualized. For instance, "I think that other beats can do something quantifiable,"

explained Gibson (personal communication, June 5, 2013). On the other hand he said,

"Religion stories tend to be more narrative, more about ideas … so it can often be a

little more complex to try to use multimedia to illustrate the main theme" (personal

communication, June 5, 2013). However, like other interviewed reporters, Gibson was

quick to assert that religion stories are inherently colorful, rich with video, audio and

background information that could be supplemented through hyperlinks. Mason's

reflection resonates with the sentiments of most journalists interviewed concerning

religion reporting and multimedia, as she noted:

> Religion is rich with those kinds of images because there are so many
> things in religion that are affected by culture. You have food, dress,
> music, ritual, sacred books and readings, you have houses of worship

and they can all contribute to elements that video and broadcast can display, better than [mediums including] text words. (personal communication, June 11, 2013)

While there was general consensus that religion stories lend themselves to multimedia, journalists did not believe that mastering multimedia's advantages was without challenges. However, these limitations were much less related to access of religious places and experiences than predicted. When asked about the reaction of believers to multimedia equipment being brought into a place of worship, every reporter interviewed said that religious institutions, leaders and believers had been largely receptive and open. While each journalist did have at least one anecdote to share about a particular instance when video and audio recording or photography was forbidden due to religious belief or the need to maintain the integrity of a "ritual moment" (described by Brachear and termed by Columbia University journalism professor Ari Goldman) this did not particularly discourage journalists as being a limitation to religion multimedia's potential. Although reporters did note that obtaining multimedia representations of religion stories might require more collaboration and care than in most beats, particularly because most religious places exist on private property, no journalists interviewed for this study found this to be a particular threat to its capacities.

More burdensome was the concern expressed that religion can be too nuanced and layered to be displayed in a sound bite or video clip accurately. A reporter for *Voice of America*, Socolovsky offered a unique perspective, explaining that his position as a reporter is much like a foreign correspondent's responsibility for

providing the international community news about the United States. Socolovosky explained that some of his reporting consists of dispelling misconceptions or preconceptions about the religiosity of the United States that the international community holds. "Some people think we are all speaking tongues and snake handling and that there are millions of churches around the United States doing that," said Socolovosky and this challenge comes from the fact that "what looks best on TV is a very fervent style of worship, a very emotional worship which is often found in Pentecostal and charismatic churches, [but] that is not the who story of religion in this country" (personal communication, October 28, 2013).

On a more general level, some journalists still expressed concern with the time-intensive commitment multimedia required, and the access problems of a sizable number of readers who may not have high-speed internet to give them the chance to view this kind of reporting. As a result, while religion reporters were optimistic, journalists young and old did not diminish the importance of an old-fashioned, text-heavy story – reiterating that the story must dictate the proper medium.

One exciting reflection of many of the journalists interviewed about the future of multimedia for religion journalism was that telling stories with video, audio and still images may ultimately bring religion back to its roots as an oral tradition and experience. "Religious stories are a very lived and a very personal experience for people, and it's often a visual or an audio kind of experience," explained Kaleem (personal communication, June 5, 2013). As a result, there is an aspect of multimedia that allows sources to tell their own religion stories, and for readers to experience

religious moments firsthand. "I personally believe in giving people as much access to those original sources as possible, [getting] myself out of the way of the story," said Tenety, seeing multimedia as allowing her to do just that in her reporting (personal communication, June 25, 2013).

The last point of general agreement in these interviews was journalists could not foresee what lay ahead for religion and multimedia. Nevertheless, what Mason did note was that, as an industry, journalism is still very much in the Wild West time of the internet. While this may be chaotic and scary, it is also normal. To put it into perspective, Mason suggested that journalists compare the internet with other communication paradigm shifts. The printing press, for instance, was invented in the mid-1400s but cost, distribution and illiteracy prevented most of the world from receiving a copy of a book until hundreds of years later (Silvia 3). With television taking about three decades to reach half of the American public, and the internet taking ten years to reach that same population, embracing progress is still not an instant enterprise, and something can be learned from the extensive dissemination time of Gutenberg's invention: understanding the full capacities of a new technology takes time.

Multimedia and a Local Context

While scholarship provided a solid foundation for the history and influences of religion journalism, multimedia is a fairly new entity, and scholarship about it is only beginning to be published. As many of the interviewed religion journalists alluded, religion has held a long, natural collaboration with other sensory and visual mediums,

where pictures, songs and visual actions have been a significant component to worship. As Silvia and Anzur's *Power Performance* reiterated, "In the days when most people could not read, religious stories came to life through images and music in a house of worship" (2011 p. xiii). For example, religious traditions such as Voodoo or the Afro-Caribbean religious practice Santeria, which calls upon the power of spirits to "protect, heal, or bless" use images to facilitate practices "by performing symbolic action, acting as a kind of analog system for acting at a distance" (Morgan 2007, p. 250). Since the Reformation, Protestants have made use of printed imagery within religious texts, as the move to print over oral discourse for personal worship meant, "images helped endow print with an aura that rooted the visual in the spoken, serving to authorize imagery as well as to enliven print" (Morgan 2007, p.14). It is only fitting that journalists use such sensory tools of worship to illustrate stories of faith and values today.

The references consulted, outside of interviews, for this essay were detailed guidebooks that provided a brief history and explanation of multimedia techniques in the midst of practical explanations of how to code websites or focus DLSR cameras. By briefly exploring multimedia – its definition, how it is used most effectively, and who uses it – as well as its relationship to local news through an abbreviated overview of two local non-sectarian religion news sites, a more comprehensive background to my professional project was established.

Multimedia Defined

Multimedia is closely related to effective storytelling skills that have always involved a mixture of words, sounds and pictures. Incorporating techniques that target a variety of senses is an integral part of communication. As a result, the concept of convergence is also used frequently in tandem with explanations of multimedia: Journalists not only use a variety of techniques but also use one medium to portray one aspect of their reporting and a different medium to tell a different portion. In this way, multimedia is meant to exist as an essential portion of a story, not simply as an extra supplement that reiterates written content. Nevertheless, while convergence may be a recent development for journalism, multimedia is not. For many decades, television has been utilizing a mixture of still images, video and text as one package of news. Moreover, the rise of audience members turning online for news, which is most readily associated with multimedia, is not largely changing the demographic of sources for readers. According to Thornburg, "Most Americans – even those who look only online for their news – rely primarily on traditional news companies for information" (p. 6). Therefore, while multimedia is important, it is not entirely undermining traditional news sources that may have deep roots in traditional story and newsroom structures.

Today, while multimedia includes live audio/video, archived audio/video, feature-length stories, podcasts, photo galleries and animated graphics (Thornburg 2011, p. 14-15), it is not necessarily superior to straight written content in every case. As was found by the Poynter Institute's Eyetrack III study (2007), interactive

presentations, as created through the use of multimedia, work best if a reporter desires to explain new process, procedures, or unfamiliar terminology (Silvia 2011). On the other hand, static text better serves to allow readers to recall factual information, particularly names and places. One can observe how both contexts would be particularly relevant for religion stories. On the one hand, religion stories seek to portray what is unusual or novel, stories lending themselves to an interactive, multimedia platform. On the other hand, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* religion reporter Ann Rodgers exemplified in her interview the ways in which religion reporters strive to report on well-known religious communities in an attempt to share information when it is influential to a large amount of a newspaper's readership base – in Rodgers' case, news pertinent to Catholic and Presbyterian practitioners. In such instances, these stories are best communicated through static text. Moreover, each medium encompassed in multimedia serves a unique purpose. For example, photos, as Thornburg explained, "give the audience more time to ponder the true novelty of unusual subject matter" (2011, p. 41). As a result, if something unusual does not require an action that must be seen for clarity – necessitating video – than photograph is often the superior medium to increase readers' comprehension.

When looking specifically at the spectrum of news outlets that exist, it is important to note that multimedia is created in a different way depending on the practical resources. On the whole, larger media outlets have the resources and staff to spread out the development of multimedia across a variety of specialists – from videographers to graphic designers to photographers. On the other hand, smaller

publications typically are relegated to having "jack-of-all-trade" journalists, in which a particular reporter writing a story is also solely responsible for its multimedia elements. Throughout my interviews, when speaking to reporters even from middle-sized to large markets, such as Ann Rogers and Manya Brachear from Pittsburgh and Chicago, respectively, they noted the expectation from their editors to use their iPhones and iPads as the main equipment to create multimedia for their pieces. This is not to say that small to middle market news outlets offer inherently poor multimedia. While the Religion Newswriters Association's online religion section award was given to both Reuters *FaithWorld Blog* and CNN.com's *Belief Blog*, the distinction was also given to a hyperlocal site called *Spokane Faith and Values*, based in Washington state.

Hyperlocal Religion News Models

In an effort to more clearly formulate my professional project, a local, online religion news site tailored to issues of faith and belief that connect with students and the larger community of Athens, I interviewed producers of two web-based publications that I have ultimately used as models in my own development process. Each site is, for all intents and purposes, hyperlocal, which Thornburg (2011) defined as community journalism that is practiced online. Nevertheless, while one outlet, *Columbia Faith and Values (Columbia FAVS)*, strives to cover religion and faith stories in the college town of Columbia, Missouri, the other, *A Journey through NYC Religions (AJourney)*, is made available to the population of the largest metropolitan area in the United States.

Each site diverges from traditional publications as they are both based in an online form and also have invested heavily in multimedia. Columbia FAVS is the third of five sites within Religion News LLC's three-year community news project funded by the Lilly Endowment. The site was established in the summer of 2012. Editor Kelli Kotraba explained that its content is largely produced from stories published by the Religion News Service, two to six student writers from the local Missouri School of Journalism, stories she develops, and thirty to thirty-five community contributors from a variety of religious backgrounds who largely write explanatory or cultural commentary pieces. Alternatively, *A Journey through NYC* religions was established in July 2010 by editor Tony Carnes as a "*National Geographic*-like web magazine on religions in New York City," as the site explains. Functioning as a non-profit corporation, *AJourney* is unique in that it largely ignores breaking news. Instead, content is gathered as reporters move systematically through the neighborhoods in New York City, covering each borough, as Carnes explained, by "[knocking] on the door of every single religious site" (personal communication, September 27, 2013). Canvassing fifty community districts in New York City, reporters move district by district, even grouping their stories this way on their news site. As *AJourney*'s news model requires a large population, it cannot be successfully mirrored in many alternative markets, particularly small towns. Carnes explained that this kind of approach is only really sustainable if one has many people moving around, such as immigrants, who constantly change the religious landscape. Nevertheless, while *AJourney*'s content development model may not be a practical guide for my own

professional project, I chose to look at *AJourney* because it is one of the only

nonsectarian religion news sites that places multimedia at the forefront of publication.

It is important to note that what has been gained from each in-depth editor

interview is largely subjective, and is influenced not only by the news outlets'

structure, but also by the geography and religious identity of the communities these

publications serve. It is my goal to tease out the information gathered that is most

widely applicable, in the case of any hyperlocal site, regardless of community size,

geographic location, or content development model.

Columbia Faith and Values

Kotraba highlighted two distinct aspects of maintaining a local religion news

site that affect the content and outreach of religion journalism as it is disseminated on

a hyperlocal basis. First, Kotraba noted that there is an interesting correlation to the

personal level most interviews with community members reach, in relationship to

what this means for news distributed to a small community. Kotraba said that she has

been pleasantly surprised by the very personal and candid nature of most of the

interviews she has conducted, despite that fact that in a town like Columbia

(population 108,500 in the 2010 U.S. Census), there is less anonymity. When a person

from Missouri is named in an article that is read nationwide, a person in California, for

instance, doesn't have a personal relationship with that subject, nor does he or she

have any proximity to react in a very direct way to the article, outside of web

comments. In a relatively small community, this is not the case, and community

members are often divulging information about their beliefs to friends and neighbors

that could have a direct effect on how they are treated. While Kotraba noted that this can be a challenge, she said that she finds this to be an interesting way to bring people together, with intimacy being a large part of a local news' structure.

Kotraba also went on to explain what it is like being a very specialized niche in an already small town. "On the positive side, the people who are really in to religion can seek you out, just like if you are interested in sports you can go to ESPN or if you are interested in celebrity news you can go to *People*," said Kotraba (personal communication, May 21, 2013). However, what becomes more challenging is that *ColumbiaFAVs* is not often visited by people unless they are specifically seeking religion news. "You aren't going to happen upon us if you are looking at politics or mainstream things," noted Kotraba (personal communication, May 21, 2013) because the site isn't tucked away in the religion pages of the Sunday paper, for example, which readers might flip through near the ads. Instead, online niche sites have the luxury of being reachable for viewers, even worldwide, who are interested in seeking it, while invisible to local community members who are far outside the niche interest. Ultimately, Kontraba reflects that this kind of phenomenon inherently changes the kind of audience that is developed through a hyperlocal small town site. *ColumbiaFAVS* has the tendency to form a smaller, more devoted following. "Long term it is very important to have a group of people that are very invested in the news. They aren't just reading it because it sounds weird or crazy but because they actually care about it and will take that news and think about it and act on it or do something with it," she said (personal communication, May 21, 2013).

A Journey Through NYC Religions

The crux of Carnes' news model for *AJourney* hinges on a philosophy he calls "sympathetic objectivity" (personal communication, September 27, 2013). Intrigued by the changing journalism market in which many specialized journalists have been laid off or fired because of budget cuts, Carnes explained that he learned from the approach of news sites such as *ProPublica*, which sought to hire laid-off investigative journalists to form a largely data-driven news source. He noted that such sites have particularly impressed him as *ProPublica* has already won two Pulitzers – one in 2010 for an investigative reporting piece on euthanasia at a New Orleans hospital in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and the other in 2011 for national reporting on the Wall Street financial crisis (Steiger 2011). Carnes believed that this same concept could be used when looking at the plethora of religion journalists on the market. Additionally he believes that sponsors and readers would be interested in financially supporting such an initiative.

AJourney's news model begins with the belief that conventional approaches to reporting in which the importance of skepticism is placed first, followed by objectivity and then possibly sympathy at the end, is an inherently hostile and flawed journalism model. "If you go to most journalism schools, that is what they teach you, to be skeptical and distant," Carnes said. "And over time skepticism becomes cynicism" (personal communication, September 27, 2013). Carnes also asserted that the culture of journalism to affirm investigative reporting as the highest form of journalism is, in his opinion, a mistake. He believes most reporters go into journalism to help people

and their communities. Instead, he asserted that community journalism, which can include investigative journalism, should be considered the highest form of reporting.

Carnes said the "trinity" of community journalism has been summarized as "open hands [and] open hearts make for interviews, skepticism later if necessary" (personal communication, September 27, 2013). What this means on a practical level is that Carnes mentors his reporters to cultivate empathy first, objectivity next, and ultimately skepticism if it is needed. With the parachute journalism style of Carnes' religion news site, where reporters must take on similar role as a foreign correspondent, constantly in a new area with few to no contacts, Carnes believes that opening relationships through sympathy is essential. *AJourney* reporters are taught to consider the use of four specific questions in mining stories in the locations where they find themselves: (1) What is unique or special about you (your faith, or your religious community)?; (2) Are you making an impact on your community, neighborhood, or network of people? (3) Give us an example of an impact you have made in the last couple of weeks. (4) If you were the mayor of New York, how would you change the city? Carnes describes each of these questions as both offering empathy to interviewees, approaching them without preconceived ideas (such as through questions one, two and four), as well as checking for accountability and gaining objectivity (such as through question three).

Having this relationship with their stories helps *AJourney* to create the multimedia elements they view as so intricate to their storytelling. "Because multimedia allows you an intimacy," explained Carnes "It allows you to really connect

with people. But if you have the idea that your connection with people should be skepticism and distance, it really limits the type of multimedia you can do" (personal communication, September 27, 2013).

To date, *AJourney* has covered about 80 percent of New York City. When the site's reporters finish their initial canvassing, Carnes said they have a lot of places they plan to go back to that deserves a second look.

Professional Project

From the start, my professional project has been a mixture of the models presented above. I have reported three feature-length stories and two supplementary articles with a focus on at least two multimedia components (hyperlinks, photos, audio, video, info graphics) in each story in addition to written content, drawing from the heavy multimedia basis for *AJourney* (http://athensbeyondbelief.wordpress.com). However, these stories are not bound by strict geography, just as they do not exclude event coverage that has a relevant timeless attribute for readers. Through the process I have sought collaboration with three visual communication sophomore students who expressed personal interest in the topic and who bring expertise to the multimedia content where my own skills are lacking. In preparation for working with these peers, I searched for stories and immersed myself in all of the diverse forms of religious communities, interviewing four World Religion department faculty members, introducing myself to numerous religious leaders in the community, and subscribing to email lists of every religion-based and spiritual student organization I could find.

Furthermore, I developed the following mission statement for *Beyond Belief*, a non-

sectarian religion news site that launched in April 2014. The mission statement reads:

> *Beyond Belief* seeks to provide monthly nondenominational religion,
> spirituality, faith, and values coverage to promote awareness and
> tolerance among its primary audience: Ohio University students. In
> the process, *Beyond Belief* aims to foster dialogue among students,
> faculty and wider community of Athens, Ohio, by highlighting
> instances in which a diverse set of belief systems — from Judaism,
> to paganism, to atheism — may play a role in everyday life, beyond
> what we expect. *Beyond Belief* is a news source that strives not only
> to provide accurate, belief-oriented coverage but also to challenge
> readers to reassess the limitations and constructions they place on
> belief systems.

I created an editorial policy and newsroom structure so that the site can be sustained

beyond my graduation, taken up by the student leadership within the OU student

chapter of the Religion Newswriters Association (OU RNA), which I have founded on

campus. This has been an exciting opportunity particularly because OU RNA is only

the second RNA student chapter in the country. The OU Religion Newswriters

Association has adopted the mission statement of the national Religion Newswriters

Association which states: "The Religion Newswriters Association is a charitable,

literary and educational organization whose purpose is to promote excellence in media

coverage and in public discourse about religion. RNA envisions religion reporting and

commentary informed by civility, accuracy, fairness and insight" ("Our mission,"

n.d.). Because RNA does not currently promote a code of ethics specific to religion

journalists, but instead references the SPJ Code of Ethics sufficiently pertaining to the

religion beat, this mission statement will be used as a guide for make editorial and

leadership decisions within both my professional project and OU RNA, respectively.

This mission statement will have a direct influence in the two main ethical issues addressed in the editorial policy (available in the "About" section of the website): pre-publication review and viewer-generated comments. Because *Beyond Belief*'s mission is to serve as a voice for belief systems throughout the campus and wider community, and because the new site's primary goal is to promote awareness and tolerance as well as civility, accuracy, fairness and insight, pre-publication review (providing a copy of an article draft to the source before its publication) will be considered on case by case basis. Pre-publication review will be granted upon request in cases in which the subject matter is exceedingly nuanced, particularly concerning a practice or religion that is traditionally marginalized or reported on polemically. Moreover, pre-publication review will be granted upon request in the case of a personal profile piece, or a story particularly crafted around a small dominant group of sources, under the assumption that religion and beliefs are intimate topics in which our role as reporters is to capture and render the subject's voice as accurately as possible. Providing pre-publication review aims to further this effort. Nevertheless, in the case of pre-publication review, the reporter and editor reserve the right to reject any comment or editing change from a source that he or she feels inaccurate or that compromises the originally integrity of the interview. Additionally editors will not provide an edit to any direct quotes unless the existence of a clear inaccuracy is agreed upon by the reporter and source. Ultimately, all suggestions made by a source upon pre-publication review will be considered in light of the change's ability to tell a more clear, fair, accurate and insightful story.

Because of the medium of *Beyond Belief*'s publication, a template provided by the blogging site *Wordpress,* the handling of viewer-generated comments will be limited slightly by the capacities of the template. However, currently through *Wordpress*, commenters must sign in with a valid email and username, which will appear with the comment. Because this process allows for a level of anonymity that may encourage comments that are disrespectful to other readers, the editor-in-chief of *Beyond Belief* reserves the right to restrict any viewer comments deemed inappropriate by removing such a comment from the site and noting the deletion. As guided by Thornburg, comments will be taken off the site if they contain the following: material that is vulgar, doubled posted, off-topic, copyrighted, threating, hate speech, or a form of impersonation (2011, p. 326). If content removal becomes a recurring issue for a particular commenter, further action may be taken, with the discretion of both the editor-in-chief and publisher, to curtail that commenter's further participation in dialogue on the site.

CHAPTER TWO

Reflective Essay

Every great undertaking has a beginning. However, as I have realized throughout my undergraduate professional project, my HTC honors thesis originated far earlier than I anticipated. As a freshman HTC journalism student at Ohio University, I took a News Writing course with Dr. Hans Meyer where the curriculum, focused on both writing and multimedia skills, required each student to pick a beat. Sitting in Dr. Meyers' office three years later as I sought his advice about a web-build issue for a certain undergraduate professional project, he mentioned the multimedia work I had submitted for his course – a video clip depicting the Hare Krishna community in Athens. My chosen beat, I recalled, was religion, a topic that has intrigued me for longer than I realized. As a result, I am so grateful to watch my academic and professional fascination with religion journalism come full circle in my undergraduate career through this undergraduate professional project.

This essay will offer a chronological reflection on my professional project, which culminated in the creation of the news site *Athens Beyond Belief*, launched with three multimedia stories and two supplementary stories. However, *Athens Beyond Belief* is not the only fruit of my labor – from securing an internship at the Religion Newswriters Association (RNA), to attending the RNA's national conference, to establishing one of only two existing student chapters of RNA on our campus, the journey of my professional project has been multi-faceted. Using the subheads of preparation, implementation, and hindsight, I will harken back in my reflection to the original research question that drove my work: How are reporters using technological

advances in audio, video and visualization to tell an intimate, nuanced story that is accurate, sensitive, and not sensationalized?

Preparation

In establishing the premise of my professional project – a multimedia news site – background research was required to discern the medium, narrative type, and goals it would encompass. This project has been a learning process and has evolved from its inception, beginning as an iBook magazine that would feature six multimedia stories and also be available in print. Having extensive experience with magazine design from my Honors Tutorial College media experience, I felt most skilled in producing a magazine-like product. Nevertheless, as I worked with iBook development during my summer internship at the Religion Newswriters Association headquartered in Columbia, Missouri, while creating a reporter guide for Pope Francis' first 100 days in the Vatican, the medium presented a hurdle related to accessibility. As reporter Bob Siementra of *The Tennessean* reiterated in his interview, audiences do not have universal access to new technology – particularly iPads, the predominant equipment used to view iBooks. Moreover, to use my interviews to inform my own experience, I needed to create a product that would be comparable to the interviewees' platform of news dissemination: online news.

It is important to note here that not all religion news producers establish a clear line between blog and news site. In fact, even reputable news sites distribute religion reporting through the blogosphere; CNN Belief Blog is a good example of this. Additionally *The Huffington Post* as well as the hyperlocal site *Columbia FAVs*

ultimately walk a fine line between opinionated blogging and more objective news

treatment of religion – offering stories written by reporters as well as commentary

pieces written by clergy members and religion scholars. For a hyperlocal site like

Columbia FAVs, editor Kellie Kotraba explained that the decision to provide regular

opinionated or explanatory pieces from contributions of the local religious community

was in some regards simply practical. Contending with a small staff, but a readership

expecting regular coverage, Kotraba has worked to close this gap through her more

than 30 community writers who represent a plethora of religious backgrounds. While

this model does offer an interesting blend of personal testimony and traditional news

coverage on religion, I was not comfortable with such a dominant mixture of personal

commentary and opinion on my own site. A reoccurring reflection from the religion

reporters I interviewed was that the religion blogosphere and digitalization of news

have made religion coverage more "opinion and analysis," as stated by PBS

broadcaster Kim Lawton. To minimize concerns of bias or sensationalized rhetoric,

which can be more prevalent in blog-style testimonies, I decided that it was most

appropriate to offer traditionally reported coverage and raised the expected period of

time for newly released material to every month (instead of daily like *Columbia

FAVs*). Moreover, it was my thought and hope that in using more multimedia

storytelling, videos, audio, and hyperlinks would provide this kind of personal

testimony, commentary, or explanation from religious figures that might be offered in

a site like *Columbia FAVs* through their community writer commentary. By

maintaining this distinction between source testimony and commentary which will be

readily associated with the source via audio, video, or a link that takes the viewer to an external location, journalistically collected information will be distinct in hopes of establishing a clear line between information that could contain personal opinion and intentional bias.

The next phase of preparation, establishing myself in the community as a reporter interested in religion stories, was undoubtedly my favorite process. I began as early as the student involvement fair in September, signing up on the email listing of every religion-related student organization I could get my find (which was really confusing to observers who watched me walk unabashedly from the CRU to the Ratio Christi table). For the sake of transparency, I introduced myself to each student organization representative present, explaining that I was a journalist joining the email listing because I was interested in visiting the group to potentially report on its identity and role on campus. Most representatives were very receptive, already challenging my stereotypes that religious institutions would be closed and private toward media attention. No table attendee prohibited me from joining the email listing, while some seemed to provide me with more attention than students generally interested in joining the organization. While this initial interaction was promising, further cultivating these student organizations has ultimately been largely disappointing. Establishing the OU Religion Newswriters Association (OU RNA) in November, I again reached out collectively to these organizations, expressing interest in collaborating with them and the members of OU RNA. To this inquiry I received no response and when reaching out to Ratio Christi specifically, I received a negative response in which members

expressed that they were not sure they were comfortable with having a Ratio Christi member attend an OU RNA panel for religions/spiritual student organizations to share about their religious identity. I have a few guesses as to why this may be the case; particularly that media organizations like OU RNA when compared with an individual journalist can be much more intimidating. Additionally, the season of the academic year may ultimately play a major role in the willingness organizations have to invest additional time and resources into the media. While students and organizations may have much more time to promote during early September, engaging cooperative initiatives in January and February may be much less attainable. A trend I did notice in my inquiry, that I was surprised to find absent within the interviews conducted, was the reception I received from relative minority religions – the Muslim and Jewish communities specifically. While I had cultivated a longstanding relationship with the Jewish community prior to my research – which undoubtedly influenced my experience – I was surprised by the incredibly accommodating efforts of the Muslim Student Association and the communication director to introduce me to the community. As many of my interviews mentioned, many religions are embracing the power of online media to create a favorable image in society – an identity I imagine is especially valuable to minority religions in a community.

In addition to reaching out to student religious and spiritual organizations, I was able to meet with four world religion professors within the university to discuss the religious representation they saw in the classroom. I found these connections particularly invaluable as, while they did not lead to stories directly, the meetings

made aware to a community of academics that I was seriously interested in religion. On the other hand, avenues that I found unhelpful in retrospect were the university's "religious and spiritual" resources and University Interfaith Association information found online. In speaking to a few members of the University Interfaith Association, including Nancy Sand, Rick Teske, and Rabbi Danielle Leshaw, I received the notion that the "association" was largely defunct as any kind of working alliance.

Ultimately, as a result of all this background research, my efforts yielded more story ideas than I could possibly report on (see Appendix One for a completed list), attesting to the common idea from my interviews that religion, faith, and value stories can come from anywhere. As one may note, most of these stories are not time sensitive, and as a result, I hope this brainstorm may come to further fruition through the work of the OU Religion Newswriters Association who will carry on *Athens Beyond Belief* as a news site after my graduation.

Two levels of Shoemaker and Reese's Hierarchy of Influence were significant in deciding which stories to cover: media routines and individuals. The decision process of story collection was largely affected by influences of media routines and the individual (as defined by Shoemaker and Reese's Hierarchy of Influences). In some cases my work was guided by the interest of and collaboration with my photographers, three sophomore photojournalism students who volunteered their services after I shared my need for photographers with contacts in the School of Visual Communication. Lacking the personal skills to provide professional photography, enlisting the help of these peers without pay meant that I wanted to

provide projects that would sustain their personal aspirations and schedules. While this was not a problem for two of the original stories I had interest in pursuing – Islam on campus and the Jewish community's relationship to the Athens Farmers Market – my last multimedia project topic grew directly from a conversation with one of my photographers after mentioning I was interested in pursuing the topic of business and religion (turning into a profile of the local business Beads and Things). While juggling work with three different photographers proved to be exceedingly strenuous – one photographer was ultimately unable to help, another could not complete in full the photography we had mapped out – the experience of working with photographers and realizing the influence their own capabilities and aspirations had on my journalistic work was a valuable process.

My last piece of significant preparation work was the abbreviated feature writing tutorial done under the guidance of Assistant Dean Cary Frith. It was not before dissecting the brilliant features of Tom Junod, Calvin Trillin, and Skip Hollandsworth that I realized that feature writing was not a glorification of fluffy creative writing, but a craft of its own. My journalism work has always been technical and rigid in style, stemming from my analytical thought process. Translating scholarly and scientific topics for three university research publications, it was difficult to find my own voice, and especially realize the ways in which I needed to own my stories. Prior to working in this feature writing style, I believed the highest ethical responsibility to the truth was achieved by allowing my sources to mold and dictate their story as much as possible. By remaining largely removed from the process, I

believed I was being a better journalist, illuminating more truth. While countless

exercises in journalism ethics have taught me "reporting can not be truly objective," I

had not witnessed the actuality of multiple true perspectives in one narrative until

analyzing feature-writing pieces. It was difficult to find my own license to write what I

saw, however, Skip Hollandsworth's "The Last Ride of Cowboy Bob" taught me that

so much validity and truth can be gleaned from simply collecting and portraying the

miniscule details.

Ultimately, I did not have to choose feature writing as my reporting method for

this project. However, it was my desire to portray non-traditional profile and trend

stories, depicting personal and detailed stories of faith that lead me to feature writing.

Through this process I have begun to command my own writing voice. Ultimately

feature writing takes immense foresight, the ability to know how to use each detail,

symbol or reoccurring theme to tell a better story. Unlike inverted pyramid styles of

reporting, feature writers may leave the punch line to the end, diligently intriguing the

readers to move throughout the story. I have a desire to create pieces that readers are

enticed to read in full, and feature writing has undoubtedly taught me my greatest

lessons in "preparation" and "planning," as much is required for a galvanizing piece.

Implementation

While I began initial visits to the Islamic Center of Athens, Hillel, and Beads

and Things (the three final overarching institutions for my multimedia stories), official

reporting did not begun until January 2014, when my goals were still more ambitious

– as I hoped to complete five full stories, each with an independent multimedia

element. My objective was to provide stories that filled particular target categories: religious institutions, personal testimonies, science, business and academia. The aim to provide a story for each content category ultimately failed not because each of these divisions did not have an appropriate story with obtainable multimedia but ultimately due to time. Many of the characterizations of religion reporting I highlighted in my scholarly paper proved to be true in practice – most were not event-based or breaking news and were nuanced. As a result, cultivating relationships with sources I had never met in order to tell an intimate story about their connection to faith was time intensive. Moreover, throughout my research I experimented with multiple angles ultimately gravitating toward a combination of Silk's topoi: good works, tolerance, and inclusion. The only story that did not match well with any of Silk's particular topoi was "Faith on a String:" a depiction of a local business that sells beads and other spiritual items to maintain a livelihood. In addition the stories that did embody elements of Silk's topoi did not always entail one topos specifically. While "Stewart Street Sanctuary" and "The Bare Bones of Social Justice" largely represented the topoi of inclusion and good works respectively, "Unveiling Misconceptions" and "Rooting Diversity for Small Town Judaism" were a combination of tolerance and inclusion. I suspect that this diversion may stem both from my awareness of these topoi, ambition to find more creative story plots, feature writing style, as well as the fragmentation of religious belief in the past 20 years.

Each project provided new challenges of reporting and multimedia. Beginning with "Unveiling Misconceptions," meeting Mariam Aboukar on a visit to Friday

afternoon prayers at the Islamic Center of Athens was an unexpected surprise in my

desire to cover the Athens Islamic community. From the outset, it was clear that

Mariam's enthusiasm, kindness, charisma and sincerity would lend itself to a profile

piece concerning a woman who proudly wore hijab. Mariam's personal story allowed

me a context to share not only a personal testimony of faith – a faith often

sensationalized or misrepresented – but also an intersection of science and religion. As

this profile was exclusively about Mariam, it took many coffee meetings and visits to

her medical school activities over the course of three months to gain the proper trust

and insight to tell an accurate story – a luxury most journalists are not allotted.

Nevertheless, Mariam made it easy, not only by accommodating a meeting with my

photographer at her home mosque in Columbus, Ohio, but also by eagerly telling her

story. Carnes' "empathy first, objectivity next, and skepticism if needed" model

served as an important guide throughout the process, especially as I spoke with

Mariam about hijabs and women's rights. Ultimately, telling Mariam's story through

multimedia proved challenging in ways largely unrelated to religious sensitivities or

restrictions. Prohibited photography of women in the Islamic Center during Friday

afternoon prayers was the only religious restriction imposed, and was a hurdle that

may have been negotiated if further time had been available. Additionally, the chosen

form of supplementary multimedia – a photo slideshow – raised challenges in

portraying Mariam through her prayer in a way that was not unflattering or

unappealing to a viewer – who may then be repelled by the faith as a whole. Because

much of Islamic prayer involves prostrating, sophomore photographer Emily Harger

was very sensitive to the challenges at hand, capturing other gestures to tell Mariam's faith story. In the end, due to the intimate and focused nature of the article, Mariam was given peer publication review in which she made minimal grammatical suggestions and offered insight for photo captions. Furthermore, in searching for the proper story angle for Mariam's story, I obtained source material for two additional sidebar stories; one published on *Athens Beyond Belief* entitled "Steward Street Sanctuary" and another concerning the Sufi belief of a Ohio University professor I hope to publish at some point in the near future.

While my experience with Mariam resulted in a dear friendship and meaningful learning experience, the frame that her story would take was much less apparent than "Faith on a String." While I began meeting with Mariam long before visiting Beads and Things, it was this story that I was first able to write, as the plot, visuals and details were much more intuitive to pick out. "Faith on a String" developed into a clear multimedia audio slideshow story long before I even set pen to paper because the store is such a visual wonder of color in and of itself. Because my photographer had previously shot the Beads and Things establishment for a past project, she had familiarity with the sources and store, and there were no restrictions in her effort to collect photography. From a journalistic perspective, framing a story around beads that served as religious and spiritual objects had a clear and established history that made writing the feature easy regardless of the character of my sources. Nevertheless I was ecstatic to find that Joey, the storeowner, was a largely spiritual person and someone who opened up very quickly. In retrospect, my greatest challenge

was putting the multimedia audio slideshow together with minimal audio editing experience. While the photography was stunning and the photographs and audio were easy to obtain, the realities of multimedia creation were tough. In hindsight, I would have done more planning to collect clearer audio for a better presentation.

Last by not least, "Sustaining Small Town Judaism" grew out of a personal relationship to Rabbi Danielle Leshaw, a personal mentor and friend. While this story offered its own challenges of bias as I had such a personal connection to the source, it offered opportunities to glean story ideas that may not have come about otherwise. The initial idea of looking at the Athens Farmers Market as a place of spiritual community stemmed from an informal conversation we had almost a year ago, one that was able to grow into a story of how the practice of Judaism has evolved in a small town. While I aimed to be as transparent as possible about my personal relationship with Rabbi Danielle, the story was ultimately dominated by a side story to which I had much less relation and stock (hopefully minimizing any unconscious bias) concerning the Got Swabbed? bone marrow campaign. One unforeseen advantage of my connection with Rabbi Danielle was troubleshooting with problems experienced in the multimedia collection process. Again access and material to portray visually were not the issue of the multimedia video I hoped to create, but instead faulty equipment and inexperience. Unable to coordinate with my third photographer to collect video and photographs, I obtained this multimedia material alone. However, in two cases when I used DSLR cameras to collect audio for the story, the camera either neglected to record sound or continually started and stopped creating choppy clips. While it was

hard to tell whether further instruction or better equipment could have ameliorated the situation, video was ultimately obtained through an iPad, technology that professionals Manya Brachear and Ann Rodgers both shared they use on a regular basis anyways.

Hindsight

While establishing the proper structure, coding, web hosting services, and layout to make *Athens Beyond Belief* what it is now was a laborious process, it is not one that I will largely elaborate on

Table 2

Professional Project Summary

	Story Category	Multimedia/Supplement
"Unveiling Misconceptions"	Campus	Photography, Hyperlinks, Sidebar
"Faith on a String"	City	Audio Slideshow
"Sustaining Small Town Judaism"	Campus	Video, Hyperlinks, Sidebar

here. The main concern of my professional project has been to explore the process of multimedia religion reporting. Nevertheless, I am grateful my work has done much more. Ultimately my professional project allowed me to go above and beyond my research questions because it gave me practical experience not only reporting on religion but also building a website, designing its story categories, establishing an editorial and comment policy, as well as developing both a promotional and sustainability plan. One of the most vital aspects of this entire process has been creating a comprehensive project that reassess the state of religion journalism and offers insight for sustaining a future. The fourteen qualitative interviews I conducted not only informed my professional project reporting, but also my approach to religion

and society as a journalist and academic. Religion penetrates every circumstance, but, as these journalists have taught me, to engage the subject of religion in the public sphere I must find the crossed roads with between religion and other subjects from health to education to politics. As a result, I did not search for "religion stories" in religious institutions or with religious people throughout my coverage, but instead looked for the significant secular issues within these religious places of society (as well as vice versa). Additionally, these interviews made me conscientious of the distinction between source opinion and journalistically collected information – a fine line to balance – but a current point of contention for many reporters in the field who worry coverage is becoming more like commentary and analysis. The type of stories available on my site reflects this awareness.

In terms of multimedia, these interviews molded the way I would approach reporting, as they emphasized the inherently significant nature of colors, sounds, and smells to religious traditions. Instead of always searching for a religious story and considering the visualization of that story afterward, I allowed myself to be drawn to trends and issues that appealed to my senses, reassured by their experience that significant religious stories lay within these details. I was careful to allow for more time and planning in pursuing these stories – seeing in these anecdotes the relative care and coordination required for these stories to be reported on multiple platforms. Last, a mistake these interviews prevented me from making was privileging the treatment of multimedia elements over the written content – a medium all of these journalists, both young and all, still deeply venerated.

Nevertheless, in my experience with religion reporting, I see multimedia offering opportunity of sustainability and engagement long after written articles and subjects are outdated. In hindsight, what this professional project has added to my scholarly research is the affirmation that accurate, sensitive, non-sensational multimedia in religion journalism is obtainable, but what is holding it back is journalism not religion. Instead of jack-of-all-trade journalists, collaboration of specialists from trained religion beat reporters to videographers and photographers will be needed to yield successful and relevant multimedia. As religious gatekeepers begin to see the capacity that multimedia has to tell more compassionate, accurate stories, it is in my experience that doors will continue to open to such platforms.

How do you report truth about a topic like the Godbeat without conventional methods of proof? Let people define their faith and establish facts amidst what you are given. As Mattingly (2009) stated, "It may be impossible to verify that God answers prayers, but it's certainly possible to verify the fact that millions of people believe in answered prayers and that this affects their actions in private and public life" (156). It is through video, audio, photography, and graphic presentation that these millions of people can be captured in a way that stimulates our senses and humanizes our intuitions. While my scholarly research assumption about the disadvantages for multimedia on the religion beat may have been rejected by my interviews and professional experience, this scholarly paper still has significant implications: The religion beat is accountable for producing just as much quality multimedia as the next

beat. Only time will tell whether this form of media will provide opportunity for

tolerance and healing or sensationalism and bigotry.

Appendix One:
Unreported Story Ideas
http://athensbeyondbelief.wordpress.com

1. Bars versus church presence on Court Street

2. STEM professors active in faith lives (Lonnie Welch)

3. Religion studies classroom – difficult dialogue (Steve Hays)

4. Tibetan Buddhist Meditation Center and yoga interest among college students

5. Soto Zen Buddhism on campus

6. Annual protestors on campus – Profile

7. Clergy receiving graduate degrees at OU (Catholic Church)

8. First Presbyterian Church (multiple journalism professors as members)

9. Unitarian Fellowship of Athens Church and its student appeal

10. Central Avenue's goal for "Central Venue"

11. Brookfield church and a tradition of church planting (Courtney Kral)

12. Sports and faith (Athletes in Action)

13. Vegan cooking classes; a spiritual community

14. Campus Crusades – often largest student organization on campus in a given year

15. Christian Business Leaders and the religious ethics of future Wall Street workers

16. Jewish fraternities/sororities – what role does religion play?

17. Religion and Ohio University administrative members

18. Fur Peace Ranch – spirit of guitar playing

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