



## **Covering Religion: Field Insurgency In United States Religion Reporting**


By: **Gregory Perreault** and **Kathryn Montalbano**

### **Abstract**

The present study analyzes the role of religion reporting with the journalistic field. Personnel cuts within newsrooms and the development of “religion reporters” operating from religious institutions necessitate a re-exploration of the changing field. At stake is the coverage of religion, a topic particularly pertinent to residents in the United States, nearly 77% of which identify as religious to some degree. Simultaneously, the majority of the United States tends to think journalists cover religion poorly. Through the lens of field theory, this study analyzes 20 interviews with U.S.-based religion reporters who work for both mainstream and religious publications.

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# Covering religion: Field insurgency in United States religion reporting

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## Abstract

The present study analyzes the role of religion reporting with the journalistic field. Personnel cuts within newsrooms and the development of “religion reporters” operating from religious institutions necessitate a re-exploration of the changing field. At stake is the coverage of religion, a topic particularly pertinent to residents in the United States, nearly 77% of which identify as religious to some degree. Simultaneously, the majority of the United States tends to think journalists cover religion poorly. Through the lens of field theory, this study analyzes 20 interviews with U.S.-based religion reporters who work for both mainstream and religious publications.

## Keywords

religion, niche reporting, lifestyle journalism, field theory, field insurgency, in-depth interviews

It was a rally held on the west lawn of the U.S. Capitol that had all the makings of a “holy sh\*\*t” story: Washington for Jesus ’96 drew a wide range of former drug addicts, and former occult members. The story, published in *The Washington Post*, described a charismatic speaker who worked as the “sin prosecutor.” He would shout out a sin, to a yelling throng of people responding “Guilty!” And then the story presented its now infamous anecdote, still widely shared among religion reporters:

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At times, however, the mood turned hostile toward the lawmakers in the stately white building behind the stage.

“Let’s pray that God will slay everyone in the Capitol,” said Paul Crouch of the Trinity Broadcast Network (Wilgoren and Parker, 1996).

Anyone familiar with the terminology of Pentecostalism will immediately identify the problem: *slay* is a religious term indicating the movement of God within an individual. In other words, *slay* conveys the opposite implication from how the journalists heard the phrase: they were not calling for violence but an act of blessing on the congresspeople. The next day, *The Washington Post* posted a correction on the story, identifying their misunderstanding of the phrase.

To this day, religion journalists share this anecdote as an indication of the low level of religious literacy in the United States and, in particular, a lack of religious literacy among U.S.-based working journalists. But what is also noteworthy about this story is that neither Wilgoren nor Parker were religion reporters: they were crime and women’s issues reporters, respectively, assigned to cover the story at the last minute. How could they have known? What they described is, to some degree, what they would have likely looked for given their typical reporting.

This anecdote is indicative of the larger importance and value of the religion reporting. Yet, even as the United States remains a highly religious country—77% of which identify as religious (Pew Research Center, 2021)—religion reporting has struggled to find footing in the country’s journalistic sphere due to the lack of advertising support. In the same vein of Ranly (1979) and Buddenbaum (1988), this study seeks to understand the place of religion reporting in United States journalism through the lens of field theory—in order to better understand how the new players in religion reporting are operating within the field. In the historic-era of the *church pages* or even the religion section of the newspaper, much of religion news would be considered lifestyle journalism—a softer side of the journalistic field that is audience-focused and emphasized providing the audience “with factual information and advice, often in entertaining ways, about goods and services they can use” (Hanusch, 2014: 1). Based on 20 long-form interviews with U.S.-based religion reporters, from both mainstream and religious publications, this study seeks to understand how religion reporters understand their role within the field. We find that mainstream religion reporters largely described jettisoning much of the lifestyle journalism in their niche as a part of the shrinking of their field; instead, non-specialists increasingly conduct religion reporting as a part of the general news beat along with courts, crime and education. The lifestyle portion of their work has been taken up increasingly by religious publications, which mainstream journalists have largely welcomed as way to ensure that lifestyle journalism still occurs in their specialty, and hence, preserves the stability within the overall field.

## Field theory

This study operationalizes Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory in order to understand how religion reporting places itself within the journalistic field. The *field* operates as the

manner with which to understand the interactions between individuals and social phenomena (Bourdieu, 1998). In general, field theory reflects an interest in understanding the “reproduction of fields of intellectual or economic striving” (Lizardo, 2004: 377), and the reproduction of intelligence is occurring in journalism. Fields tend to fight to preserve their space and maintain the status quo (Bourdieu, 1998). The journalistic field tends to be normatively stable—although this stability comes at the expense of innovation. Hence, critical concerns about journalism’s lack of ability to innovate in terms of technology, financial structure would seem natural in that they reflect the normative stability of the field (Belair-Gagnon et al., 2020; Christensen, 2003; Perreault and Bell, 2020; Vos and Perreault, 2020). Prior research illustrates how journalists have fought to maintain journalistic stability in regards to norms and values—the field’s *doxa* (Vos et al., 2012). News values, for example, exemplify journalistic *doxa* to help determine the newsworthiness of an event (Willig, 2013).

The *doxa* both informs and is informed by the *habitus*—the “strategy generating principle enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations” (Bourdieu, 1998: 77). The *habitus*, or the habits of the field, can be defined as the accumulated experience in a field that help actors understand the “understanding of the journalistic game” (Tandoc, 2014: 562). *Habitus* is an ingrained feature of a field, with actors needing to do little conscious thought in order to know how to respond to a given situation. For example, actors may mistake activities as natural when they actually have been culturally shaped. Bourdieu (1998) uses an analogy of a baseball player who knows when to swing at a fastball with little conscious thought. In a similar manner, journalists anticipate certain forms of journalistic coverage in such a manner so that they know how to report on them with little conscious thought (Perreault, 2021; Perreault et al., 2020; Perreault and Meltzer, 2022).

Through the field theory lens, the goal of actors in the journalistic field is *capital*, or the resources within the field. Journalistic capital describes the “agency and prestige” (Sterne, 2003: 375) within a field and typically this comprises three forms of capital: economic, cultural, and social (Benson and Neveu, 2005). Economic capital refers to the economic resources available within the field (Benson, 2004) and journalists might seek such resources in order to do work toward cultural capital—acknowledged often by awards—or social capital, which the size of an actor’s social network often measures (Siapera and Spyridou, 2012). By contrast, circulation rates or advertising revenue tends to correlate with economic capital in journalism (Benson, 2004; Benson and Neveu, 2005). Journalists have demonstrated a willingness to part with economic capital if it would allow them to obtain greater cultural capital (Vos, 2019). That said, as this discussion of capital indicates, these forms of capital interconnect and in many cases are dependent upon one another.

### *Religion reporting*

As noted earlier, religion reporting primarily emerges out of the lifestyle journalism approach to journalism (Rodgers, 2010). Despite steady and substantial growth in lifestyle journalism over time, few studies explore this aspect of the journalistic field within journalism studies scholarship (Hanusch et al., 2017, 2020). Lifestyle journalism routinely finds itself at the juncture of pressure from normative journalistic values and the pull of commercial interests. While *commercial interest* certainly looks different in religion

journalism as opposed to travel journalism—and it is perhaps uncomfortable for some to consider the *commercial interest* of religion—it nevertheless follows that journalists reporting on religion find themselves covering a topic essential in determining how people spend their money (Silk, 1997). Similar to other forms of lifestyle journalism, religion reporting tends to be oriented toward personal life (Perreault, 2014).

Religion reporting would seem to be not all that different from other subfields that mix *hard news* journalism as well as lifestyle journalism—politics, science and health and wellness would all require similar levels of expertise and face competition from non-journalistic actors (Maares and Hanusch, 2020). Religion reporting perhaps faces a different audience however—if religion indeed “determines belief systems, the ways people orient themselves to the world, how one perceives his or her place and how one interacts with others”—then it would follow that the stakes of *getting the story wrong* might be quite a bit higher (Gormly, 1999: 25; see also Nord, 2004). In other words, while many journalistic niches require subfield-specific expertise, religion reporting might face higher stakes in regards to the trust of their audience and given that the topics are liable draw press hostility (Miller, 2021; Perreault, 2021; Perreault et al., 2020).

Particularly at stake in contemporary religion is *lived religion*—religion delinked from institutions and reflective of how people actually practice their faith on a daily basis (Orsi, 2006). An implication of lived religion in journalism is that the focus on institutions may miss the critical factors of, as Campbell (2010) as argued, “how an individual’s religious practices are conceived of, how religious symbolism is interpreted and applied, or how religious rituals are enacted within contemporary culture” (8). Journalists in legacy media tend to cover institutional religion for several reasons, including access to sources as well as the fulfillment of news values that tend to serve a broader perceived audience (Belair-Gagnon et al., 2020; Hoover, 1998). This occurs even as research suggests that a journalist’s imagined audience is just that: imagined, with journalists knowing far less about who their audience is than they think (Nelson, 2021). Hence, it may be that news and other information housed in digital and social media platforms can more readily record and reflect the experiences of lived religion that many spiritual people today not only embrace alongside attending official religious gatherings, but in some cases have *substituted* for institutional religion (Campbell, 2010). Moreover, people experience not only institutional religion and lived religion, but also implicit religion, which scholars have attributed to secular, contemporary practices—such as the use of digital technologies, the cultures of sport-fandom, and allegiance to political parties—resemble religion and religious experiences and can even effect changes in the individuals themselves (Campbell and Evolvi, 2019). Hoover (2006) similarly argued that to understand a religious culture, one must look at consumption to trace “how symbols, practices, and discourses from the media sphere relate to those meanings and motivations that we and they might identify as ‘religious’ or ‘spiritual’” (114).

If journalism studies scholarship in this area argues one thing uniformly, it is that much religion reporting tends to be quite poor—a result in particular of the lack of religious literacy among U.S. journalists (Hoover, 1998). The misunderstood intentions from the evangelical rally from the introduction represents a not-uncommon situation in reporting on Muslims (Munnik, 2017; Perreault, 2014; Said, 1997), Mormons (Decker and Austin, 2010; Perreault et al., 2017; Scott, 2005), and evangelical Christianity (Haskell, 2007;

Hardy, 2007). The most egregious examples of misunderstood intentions often occur where no religion specialists are involved as has been shown to be the case in sports (Ferrucci and Perreault, 2018) and gaming (Perreault, 2021).

As Buddenbaum (1988) noted based on a survey of the religion beat in the 1980s, “most larger papers give their religion journalists enough time and space to cover the news adequately, but they may give the reporter too little authority” (68)—an indication of a lack of cultural capital. This problem of cultural capital was further exacerbated in the 1990s, when producers of religion news often felt like they were working in the “news ghetto,” a weaker position within the field than if they had chosen to work in political reporting (Mason, 2012). Political reporting here serves as the niche for which a good journalist would naturally use religion reporting as a stepping stone. And indeed, religion reporting runs into few other niches more than political reporting (Mason, 2012). This fusion of religion and politics has been particularly salient in recent years given the prominence of religiously- oriented political candidates in a number of countries (Eddy, 2021; Wilcox and Robinson, 2018). Hence, it may follow that religion reporting has, since the 1990s, attained a greater degree of cultural capital that is perhaps siphoned from political journalism’s central place within the field (Tandoc, 2019).

This leads us to pose the following research questions:

- RQ 1:** How do journalists who cover religion understand their work within the field of journalism?
- RQ 2:** How do journalists who cover religion conceptualize the difference between working at religious news and secular news organizations?

## Method

In order to address the research questions, researchers identified religion reporters through the Religion Newswriters Association, an association of more than 300 that includes a range of religion journalists who work for publications both secular and religious, as well as academics who study religion. For the purposes of recruitment, researchers defined journalists as “people who work for a journalistic medium as their main job” and “carry out journalistic activities” such as publishing on current, relevant topics (Fröhlich et al., 2013: 815). We reached out to 40 journalists through a method of purposive sampling (Koerber and McMichael, 2008). For the purpose of ensuring participant anonymity, and given that many legacy newsrooms in particular may have just one or two religion reporters, it is necessary for us to withhold the names of the specific publications at which participants worked. That said, this research was conducted aiming to represent an array of journalists that come from a range of organizations: primarily print versus primarily digital news, name-brand news organizations versus smaller niche publication, secular versus religious publications, as well as personal demographics. Participants were recruited via email and contacted via Zoom after IRB approval. Interviews were conducted from December 2020 to February 2021.

The interviews probed the journalists’ experience with religion journalism and their practices in religion journalism, applying a qualitative interview methodology to draw

more depth from the questions used in the [Ranly \(1979\)](#) and [Buddenbaum \(1988\)](#) surveys. A total of 20 journalists were interviewed via a semi-structured questionnaire, with an average interview time of approximately 1 h.

Questions were divided into four areas: (1) questions about journalists' professional background and current occupational context, (2) questions about journalists' general practices in covering religion, (3) questions about how journalists define religion and journalism, and (4) questions about what journalists actually privilege in their coverage. Questions were posed such as, "Can you explain your general approach to covering religion?" and "How do you compare religion news coverage by secular and religious publications?" For the purposes of this focus, the authors only examined responses to the questions that directly applied to the research questions.

All of the participants were located in the United States. The sample of journalists described their work as happening at mainstream, secular publications ( $n = 12$ ) and religious publications ( $n = 8$ ). A majority of participants could be described as digital journalists operating in a legacy media newsroom—traditional newsrooms that operated with a digital mindset ([Ferrucci and Perreault, 2021](#); [Holman and Perreault, 2022](#); [Perreault and Ferrucci, 2020](#)). The sample was gender balanced with men ( $n = 10$ ) and women ( $n = 10$ ), and the majority of respondents described their ethnicity as "white" ( $n = 13$ ), two respondents identified as "Hispanic," two respondents identified as "Asian," and three identified as "Black" or "African-American." Religiously, most respondents identified as some form of Christian—mainline Protestant ( $n = 5$ ), Catholic ( $n = 4$ ), evangelical ( $n = 4$ ), and Eastern Orthodox ( $n = 1$ )—although there were also individual respondents who identified as Muslim, Jewish, Hindu and Pagan. Two journalists requested to not identify their religious tradition.

The researchers conducted video interviews until they agreed they had reached saturation of responses. The interviews were transcribed in two stages: through an initial, auto-transcription provided by the video calling service used for interviews (Zoom) and then the authors revisited each interview and ensured accuracy by listening to the transcripts and conducting line-by-line edits for accuracy by comparing the audio with the auto-transcription. The authors analyzed the data to arrive at themes that addressed the research questions using a constant comparative approach ([Glaser and Strauss, 2017](#)). The constant comparative approach is often associated with grounded theory; however, as [Fram \(2013\)](#) argues, the constant comparative analysis is well-suited to etic coding, driven by theory and literature. During this process, aspects of the responses considered were any allusion to the journalistic field, journalistic practice and journalistic definition making. After each response was coded, themes and thoughts emerging from the coded interviews were compared to find associations, differences and unities among them and in order to establish resonance. All participants were granted anonymity in part because this study is most interested in understanding perspectives on an institutional level. In the findings section, individual participants will not be cited in order to reflect that the institutional discourse. That said, particularly in reflection the differences to entrants of the field, we will describe participants to broadly indicate their role in mainstream news or work for religious publications.

Finally, for the purposes of this study, we describe all participants as "religion reporters" in that, that is how they self-identified and self-described.

## Findings

*The lesser-brother of political reporting.* Our first research question was posed as, “How do journalists who cover religion understand their work within the field of journalism?” Religion reporters saw the field as limiting the specialty. These limitations resulted as much from the field as from external factors. Furthermore, they expressed limitations in the comprehensiveness of the reporting they conducted—arguing that there was a substantial focus on coverage of institutions and a sort of generational divide exhibited in how much coverage was granted to “lived religion”—or the religion as it is practiced by individuals in the mundane experiences of everyday life.

In the journalistic field, the religion specialty is largely regarded as the lesser-brother to the political beat, many journalists argued. This was particularly prominent among journalists in mainstream newsrooms. One journalist put it that the attitude in the newsroom was, “Oh well, that’s just kind of fluffy stuff right that’s not that’s not as real as covering you know government corruption and other sorts of issues when, in fact....religion intersects with every element of life.” Journalists said there was little career motivation to volunteer for the religion desk, and it had to be a “kind of passion project” that journalists described as having to “beg” their editors to be put on. Largely, religion reporters saw the niche as becoming increasingly a sub-specialty within general news—a beat that “a lot of other people run into.” Many journalists saw this as a positive development path to become one of the hallmark specialties of the news section like courts, crime or education. So even as religion desks have shrunk or closed, religion reporting has seemingly grown larger than ever. However, others saw this a liability, given that specialists were not doing the reporting.

The reason the field has limitations, journalists argued, is that religion reporting remains “very much bound by how the larger publication understands religion...or doesn’t understand that.” In the case of one journalist, he was assigned to a split health/religion beat when he pitched a story—a story he pictured to be a front-page piece—about the split of the largest Protestant denomination in the United States. Instead, the editor “spiked the story.” When he confronted his editor, the editor told him: “Every time you write about that stuff, nobody reads it...Every time you write about [news about the denomination], we get too many letters to the editor and nobody reads it, but fanatics.” This was a perplexing rationale from the editor: that no one reads the reporting, and yet the reporting results in too many letters to the editor.

But as another journalist put it, religion is a difficult topic to bring up in a newsroom unless it is “in particularly defined ways” and, as such, “They can further they can end up redefining the problem.” The public views the niche with more suspicion than other coverage areas, journalists noted. Journalists reasoned that there might even be a sort of unconscious bias that religion reporters are all religious. If the niche were sports, it would certainly be more likely than not that the average sports reporter has some level of appreciation for football and baseball but it does not necessarily follow that they are *fans*. Hence, participants took issue with the assumption of their own religiosity: “Folks often accidentally say *religious journalists* instead of *religion journalist*, because they just assume that folks who cover it are rooting for the world of religion; that they’re sort of



biased in favor of churches.” One journalist argued that this perspective comes from higher in the journalism hierarchy and descends from there: “The higher you go in the journalism feeding chain, the less they respect the role that religion plays in American life.” As a result, several journalists argued, a gap grows between religious activities that audiences would like to know about, and the activities that journalists can cover in newsrooms.

The heavy emphasis on institutions in reporting reflects the first of these limitations. One journalist, who holds one of the rare religion specialist positions in mainstream news, noted that she does a fair amount of institutional reporting—but predominantly on a religious tradition with local roots and with which she has reporting expertise. In general, religion reporters tended to emphasize institutions in reporting religion given that it represented the “the public....liberal world we all live in touching that religion world.” The lifestyle journalism in this specialty comes with more personal questions, that require a degree of rapport; questions like, “How do you teach your children to pray?” require journalists to dig deep into communities, into their audience and to be willing to learn. The lifestyle journalism component of religion reporting is where lived religion would be most likely to appear.

Many respondents recognized the difficulties of incorporating “lived religion” in their reporting, but they nevertheless appreciated the emphasis on looking at religion through the eyes of their readers. To some degree, respondents divided into age categories by their interest in lived religion. There were three groups of respondents who showed a strong interest in reporting lived religion—the youngest journalists in the field, the most experienced journalists, and those who tended to report on marginalized groups, marginalized defined as either existing outside of Whiteness and/or outside of Protestant Christianity. Experienced journalists regarded the lived religion stories as the ones that required the most work on their part, best represented their audience. That said, there was a middle range of respondents who were more experienced in the field who largely saw religion reporting as essentially tied to the institution. Institutions, of course, allow journalists to obtain financial documents, press releases, and interviews through press relations people. To this group, lived religion was not necessarily non-existent, but was it news? They were not convinced it was, certainly not the same degree as a released papal statement or institutional press release.

### *Divide between the secular and religious*

Our second research question was, “How do journalists who cover religion conceptualize the difference between working at religious news and secular news organizations?” As one respondent put it, “I understand there’s been a huge fragmentation in media. Baptist Press, NCR, dozens of Catholic publications: those people would be doing great religion reporting in a secular institution, if things [were] not as they are...General public secularism touches these institutions so that would be so interesting. That’s the public... liberal world we all live in touching that religion world.”

Participant journalists who write for both secular and religious publications expressed that religious publications could tailor their narratives more closely toward the respective

religions and religious audiences. Religious publications, that is, could provide more in-depth coverage of the daily experiences of people of a given religion. One participant remarked was best addressed through interviewing sources from the “lived religion” approach, that is, by “trying to understand individual people and see where they’re coming from, because you can’t just listen to what the Catholic hierarchy or the Southern Baptists, the big-name leaders, say about what they believe, or what they think on a particular issue.” The participant noted that if the Trump era of politics in the United States had anything to teach, it is that there is a difference between what leaders say and what the people believe: “These days, through an organized religion organized religion denominations in particular are frowned upon. So some people ... would consider themselves Christians without ever stepping foot in a church.” Another respondent remarked that they are:

Not so much interested in institutions and figures always as I am how people are experience their religion—how do their faith and their beliefs inform what they do, what they don’t do. So, for example, right now a story is how are people looking at the vaccine, and a lot of people have ethical questions about whether this is ethical to be taking this through whatever religious practice they may belong to, disinformation, and what their religious communities might be experiencing.

This participant’s response, as such, highlights how stories that circulate in other beats, such as science or medicine, implicitly draw from lived religion just as much as stories categorized as religion news. Others noted that they could incorporate lived religion when reporting on “young Black Christians who are practicing witchcraft,” and “how they hold it together”: “It was a lot about finding their indigenous roots” in “white colonized Christianity.” A fourth participant remarked that lived religion in many ways is at the center of the kind of religion they report on, Paganism, in which “there is not an organized kind of overarching structure, as everyone really is sort of decentralized.” It is important to note that a strong contingency of these respondents who incorporate lived religion in their reporting are innovative in pushing the boundaries of what kinds of groups—namely, non-White and/or non-Protestant—make it to the pages.

Journalists noted that there was far more that united religious and secular publications than divided them: “It feels very much like a family because there’s not many of us who are doing religion reporting anymore.”

A second finding was that both secular and religious publications focused on reporting on Christian religions, largely dictated by financial constraints in funding or limited access to sources, which, in turn, restricted audiences to those in major cities. In particular, more than one participant noted the Protestant lens through which many religious and secular publications continue to cover religion. As one participant reflected, “And a lot of I think both religious press and secular press very much still understand religion in a kind of Protestant vein about individuals and beliefs right and that kind of skews what we’re doing here in a lot of different ways.”

Journalists argued that both secular and religious publications tended to frame religion as two extremes, either “as somehow inherently progressive right that religion is about

love or it's about the betterment of people, improvement, these sorts of things, or it's about extremism and exclusion and intolerance." This participant added that religious publications tend to employ journalists who themselves are "believers" and will identify with those traditions, resulting in tradition-based reporting that reflects those identities and emphases. Secular publications, in turn, tend to identify religion as that which occurs within institutions, flawed in its approach by not "pushing the boundaries of how we understand this category."

A participant from a religiously-oriented publication recounted that they could in fact cover religion outside of institutions, in particular in ways that incorporate more diverse sources: "If I am doing a round-up of people's reactions to somebody famous who died or something like that, then I might not just include denominational leaders, but the atheist or secular organizations that had a comment. So sometimes it's a matter of being inclusive of people who are not as necessarily tied to institutions of religion."

One participant lamented that although there were robust Christian and Jewish outlets, Muslim reporting did not benefit from the same Islamic press in the United States, in part due to the more fragmented landscape of the religion itself: "[T]here's just not the same level of institutionalization of these communities, so you don't have one sort of umbrella. Publications that cater to them are a lot more PR-ish, if you will, as opposed to doing any sort of critical reporting." The participant added that as a reporter who covers Muslims in the United States, "the Jewish press is one I look to for inspiration" to help foster more growth in the Muslim press: "I mean for the past hundred years or so, there have been plenty of attempts to put on magazines and some of them are still ongoing, but they really don't have a very strong readership."

Journalists primarily identified a difference between secular and religious news as one of motivations. One participant noted that reporters writing stories for religious publications utilize "an additional layer of values" or "[t]hings that are fact for you," such as the idea that "the divinity of Jesus might be central to your truth as a journalist for a Christian institution." Another participant who works for a Christian publication corroborated this claim, reflecting: "We are a Christian publication and my beliefs do tend to line up pretty nicely with the publications." This participant also noted the growing space in the culture section of their publication for less overtly religious but nonetheless spiritual coverage.

One participant bluntly recounted that even within reporting from religious publications, there is a range of news—stretching from public relations campaigns that merely masqueraded as journalism—to *real* journalism, "done by people of faith, but they're more independent and more able to do what I would call consider real journalism." Another participant shared this sentiment, distinguishing between independent religious publications and those that are "house organs," while ultimately concluding that both are "interested in advancing its own particular view of religion and how it should be practiced and evaluating how people practice it in light of how they should practice it." Still another participant noted that "[t]here's a huge difference between the ones that are trying to independently look at the Catholic Church and critique it and those that are just sort of like a PR arm for the Church." This participant further critiqued religious publications with specific religions in their names for focusing on that group (or former members of that

group) as their target audience, one that does not “have the same interest, probably in making some larger point or addressing the public as a whole.”

Participants further argued that the most telling difference in reporting was that between specialists in religion and non-specialists reporting for the general news beat. Specialists tend to be “more schooled in religion. They’re part of all our annual conferences; they’re learning stuff. They’re listening to speakers there. The problem comes with people, mainly political reporters, who write for the secular publications, who just jump in and think they can get Southern Baptists. Or evangelicals, or...charismatics.” Another participant did not disagree, but noted that increasing the number of specialists was not necessarily the solution:

I do think that there could be better ways to educate journalists in general about religious literacy, because I do think it’s important for religion reporting to not just be done by religion beat reporters [...] that might contribute falsely to the idea that religion is separate from the other parts of our life. I think that is really dangerous and harmful.

## Discussion

All of this together represents a rather distinct problem for a country’s journalistic field (Casanova, 2017). In the case of the United States, even the development of non-affiliated religions may be more of a response to the growth of the Religious Right (Reiss, 2021, March) than a representation of a genuine change of heart. And while the decision to take what has ostensibly been predominantly lifestyle journalism specialty and move it largely within general news may seem to be a perplexing one—but what are newsroom managers to do when a specialty is unable to gather economic capital? Newsroom managers know that their audience is interested in religion news, but the likelihood is that advertisers like IKEA, Aldi and Toyota would prefer their advertisements to appear in any other beat (Mason, 2010). It would, after all, put IKEA in an odd position to place their advertisement on a news page opposite an explanatory piece about polygamist Mormons (Mason, 2010). Coverage such as that undertaken by *The Washington Post* becomes the next best solution—it is worth considering that such reporting may do as much harm as good.

The religion reporters in this sample would seem to perceive themselves as holding weak agency—this would be unsurprising given that the lack of economic capital for the subfield has remained consistent for several decades. This weak agency, from the viewpoint of field, would seem to reflect that lack of capital (Sterne, 2003). Yet it is worth noting that the mainstream journalists largely did not challenge the perceived hard news turn in religion reporting given that it reflected an increased cultural capital for religion reporting (Benson, 2004). That said, they also demonstrated no willingness to exclude the work of reporters from religion publications from the fold given that they provided an avenue for lifestyle journalism on religion.

The present study sought to address two research questions. In regards to the first research question, journalists largely conceptualized themselves to be in an extensively diminished position within the field. As interview participants argued, religion reporting

spurs some strong reactions from their newsroom—with editors arguing that its audience only consists of “fanatics” and that overall “nobody reads it.” Journalists found themselves, with a few notable exceptions, in a weak position within the field in order to combat such perceptions or to at least address them. As a result of a lack of resources, journalists were critical of the comprehensiveness of their reporting—in particular, arguing that much of their reporting was focused on institutions and that they, hence, underreported on “lived religion,” a type of religion they perceived as most likely to emerge from lifestyle journalism.

In regards to the second research question, participants largely conceptualized the difference as one of motivations: mainstream journalists were motivated by a pursuit of truth, and religious news journalists were motivated by a desire to represent their religious traditions, and, by extension, the religious traditions of their audience. That said, journalists also observed that for information targeted toward specific religious groups, religious publications were more likely to be able to minutely examine the inner-workings of the tradition.

From the perspective of field theory, religion reporting clearly sees itself as in diminished place in field—certainly in the years since the 1990s emphasis on the topic. While religion reporting has always suffered from weakened economic and cultural capital (Buddenbaum, 1988; Ranly, 1979), to some degree the findings evidence its debiliatory results. As mainstream newsroom religion desks have closed, journalists said they were told it was a result of an *increased*, not *decreased*, commitment to the beat. Journalists were divided on the degree to which that was true and has proven true, but the result is certainly the same regardless: journalists said that over time they found themselves conducting more mainstream religion reporting through general news and without the experienced eye of specialists. For example, religion reporters certainly acknowledged the prominence of *religion and politics* stories in news; however, they argued, these were stories conducted by political journalists and the stories reflected it. The *politics first* nature of these stories was reflected in the use of political labels to describe religion (e.g., “conservative Catholic” and “liberal evangelical”). Hence, journalists present a picture of a weakened mainstream religion journalism and a growing, religiously motivated, insurgency of news from religious groups, denoting a perceived decline in cultural capital. Journalists from mainstream news publications said that their reporting was often the most read works within the publication. And indeed, as they indicate, many of the most popular stories any given year tend to be religion stories—an indication that religion reporting maintains strong social capital. The concern regarding the motivations of work appears to be a reflection of the journalistic *doxa*—reporters from religious publications may be approaching a story with expertise, but would they be approaching it as a *journalist*? Participants from religious publications identified very strongly as journalists; nevertheless, they all noted that they wrote for a particular audience, and hence, their coverage reflected it. It is this change, the welcoming of religion reporters from religious publications, which would seem to represent the most change within the field given that much of what religion reporters described. Indeed, these findings prove consistent with prior research on the journalistic field: that it proves to be remarkably stable in terms of its norms (Christensen, 2003). Religion reporters perceiving

themselves to be in a weaker position relative to the rest of the field has been consistent in prior research on religion reporting (Ranly, 1979; Buddenbaum, 1988; Mason, 2010). That mainstream religion reporters have welcomed the religious publications into the fold may actually reflect a desire for continued stability more than change—if more of the lifestyle reporting is happening, as journalists argued, in religious news, than the loss of it would seem to be an even more substantial change than the venue by which it was reported.

This emphasis on the audience, of course, reflects the nature of lifestyle journalism. As journalists articulated it, the presence of reporters working for religious publications certainly constitutes an insurgency in the field, given that such reporters were not necessarily perceived to operate with a traditional journalistic *doxa*. However, as was the case with sports journalism confronted with the presence of *team media* (English, 2017; Mirer, 2019; Perreault and Bell, 2020), the subfield has welcomed such insurgency. As was the case in sports reporting, with team media made eligible for awards—key indicators of cultural capital (Mিরer, 2019)—new entrants in the shape of religious news reporters have also been made eligible for awards through the Religion Newswriters Association. While research question two was developed in order to explore the differences between religion journalists at mainstream news organizations and religious publications, it is then noteworthy how extensively participants discussed the similarities between their fields. This is further supported by the number of participants who had worked, or currently worked, at both secular and religious news organizations. This again supports the notion that such insurgency was welcomed, not imposed.

Finally, one of the similarities noted across the participants was the emphasis on Christianity in religion reporting—no matter the source. This supports arguments made from content analyses of religion journalism that have argued for a Protestant normativity in the United States press (Ferrucci and Perreault, 2018; Perreault, 2021; Underwood, 2002) and reflects findings from prior studies of the religion reporting field (Buddenbaum, 1988). What the participants in this sample argue was precisely this—that Christianity was privileged religion in reporting and in particular Protestant sects received the most treatment. This would seem natural given the overall religious landscape of the United States, where Protestantism would be the most familiar religion, even if people do not identify as Protestant themselves.

### Limitations

All studies have limitations and the present study has a few. As with all qualitative research, the present study is reflective of its sample. The authors made efforts to reach out and speak to a range of religion reporters from both elite media and local, religious and secular, specialized and general. Nevertheless, this did still mean that self-identifying Protestants and evangelicals Christians made up nearly half of the sample. An alternative sample could have resulted in adjusted findings. Furthermore, examining a United States-based sample, we argue, is pertinent, particularly given the levels of religiosity in the country. But it could also be that examining a sample with European, Latin American or African religion reporters could have produced given results—particularly in relation to

the final note in the discussion given that religious normativity seems to be related to the majority religion of the country (Perreault, 2014; Thomson et al., 2018). In addition, while journalists discussed the changes in the mainstream niche over time—with their perception of a decline in lifestyle journalism and rise of hard news, the present study can only argue this from the perception of the participants. Future research should consider assessing the content of religion news in order to assess the degree to which this perception matches the reality of the content produced. Finally, it is worth considering this study in context—for exactly the reasons laid out in this article, religion news is a vital issue in society. That said, its historic attachment to legacy media and inability to meaningfully enhance its economic capital would seem to put it in line with other historic legacy media specialties, such the gardening section, or reporting on local issues of democratic governance, such as the planning and zoning commission (Christensen, 2003).

Mainstream religion reporting looks quite different since it left the religion section. Journalists celebrated the hard news turn for cementing the significance of religion in public life, even as they bemoaned what was lost: religion specialists—increasingly cut from newsrooms—and lifestyle journalism—increasingly the terrain of religious publications.

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