

Entertainment and Conflict:

Media Influence on Religious Education in Upper Secondary School in Norway.

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Introduction: This thesis explores media influence on religious education (RE) through a case study of an upper secondary school in Norway. Approaching the question of media presence and use in the RE classroom through a mediatization perspective, the thesis studies how various media impact on the conditions for teaching and learning about religion. In addition to a general focus on media and RE, the thesis has a particular focus on contested issues concerning religion and on RE lessons about Islam. The research for the thesis was conducted as part of the Scandinavian research project “[Engaging with Conflict in Mediatized Religious Environments](#)”, led by Professor Knut Lundby (UiO). The thesis is article-based and consists of four articles. Professor Liv Ingeborg Lied has been the supervisor of the thesis, and has also been part of the research project.

Research questions: The thesis explores the following three research questions:

How do media (defined broadly) influence religious education lessons in (a select) upper secondary school?

What sort of dynamics are introduced into the RE classroom by the presence and use of media technology, platforms, materials and discourses, and how do these interact with other classroom dynamics?

How are media representations of contested issues concerning religion, thematized and engaged with in the RE classroom?

Method and data material: The empirical material for the thesis comes from a case study of RE in an upper secondary school in the eastern part of Norway. The fieldwork was conducted during the school year of 2015/16 and involved observation of eight RE classes and six teachers. Fifty RE sessions were observed in total. In addition, the teachers and nine students were interviewed. The data material is in the form of a) handwritten fieldnotes from classroom observations and more informal observation of teachers during breaks and meetings, b) teaching material used in the lessons, and c) recordings and transcriptions of teacher and student interviews.

Theoretical perspective: The main theoretical perspective of the thesis is institutional mediatization theory. This perspective sees the media as an institution which influences other institutions as these come to depend on the media for information, communication and infrastructure. In this way, media become part of the way other institutions perform their functions, and norms and practices from media institutions become relevant in the day to day practices of said institutions. Applying this perspective to RE, the thesis explores how the presence and use of media impact on the conditions for teaching and learning about religion. In order to analyse this kind of media influence, the thesis explores the institutional practices involved in Scandinavian media representations of religion through ‘news values’ theory and media effects studies (agenda-setting and framing), and analyses in what way these become relevant for RE. Although RE is the institutional setting explored, the thesis does not go into pedagogical theory.

Findings: The articles show that there is an extensive use of media involved in the observed RE lessons. Media technology, platforms, materials and discourses play a prominent role in RE. There are several reasons for the massive presence and use of media in the lessons, and the articles go into three of them. 1) The RE teachers use media materials in order to contextualize the content of the subject, which otherwise is considered to be too ‘academic’ and not relevant for the students. 2) The use of media technology, especially student laptops with internet access, gives students a wide range of options for activities that are not relevant for the lessons. In order to hold the students’ attention, the teachers prioritize entertaining and engaging topics and materials, often in the form of media materials such as videos. 3) In order to nuance what is seen as negative media coverage of religion, Islam in particular, RE teachers thematize media representations, issues and debates in the lessons. This is done to battle potential prejudices created by the media coverage.

Even though there are good and professional reasons behind it, this extensive media use has several outcomes. First, entertaining and controversial issues are privileged in the RE lessons. Second, use of media materials often include stereotypical and exotic representations of religion, which influence the way religion is taught and learned. Third, the need to thematize controversial and debated media issues, especially in the lessons about Islam, comes with the risk of reproducing and reinforcing media frames, resulting in confirming that these issues are the most important to learn about.

Articles: The thesis is built around the following articles:

Article 1: Toft, Audun and Broberg, Maximilian (2018). “Perspectives: Mediatized Religious Education.” In Lundby, K (ed.). *Contesting Religion: The Media Dynamics of Cultural Conflicts in Scandinavia*. Berlin/Boston: DeGruyter.

Article 2: Lied, Liv Ingeborg and Toft, Audun (2018). “‘Let me Entertain You’: Media Dynamics in Public Schools.” In Lundby, K (ed.). *Contesting Religion: The Media Dynamics of Cultural Conflicts in Scandinavia*. Berlin/Boston: DeGruyter.

Article 3: Toft, Audun (2018). “Inescapable News Coverage: Media Influence on Lessons About Islam.” In Lundby, K (ed.). *Contesting Religion: The Media Dynamics of Cultural Conflicts in Scandinavia*. Berlin/Boston: DeGruyter.

Article 4: Toft, Audun (forthcoming). “The extreme as the normal. Binary teaching and negative identification in religious education about Islam.” (Submitted to British Journal of Religious Education)