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Documentary Media and Religious Communities

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ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-115302>

Journal Article

Published Version



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Originally published at:

Mäder, Marie-Therese (2015). Documentary Media and Religious Communities. *Journal for Religion, Film and Media*, 1(1):31-35.

Documentary Media and Religious Communities

ABSTRACT

The article considers four spaces where media processes involve religious communities and agents: the spaces of production, of representation, of media communication, and of distribution network and institutional framework for circulation. These four spaces systematise the research question posed to the specific source. Furthermore the concept documentary media as viewed from a semio-pragmatic perspective is introduced. Discussion of the commercial series *I'M A MORMON* shows how different modes define documentary media according to the four spaces.

KEYWORDS

documentary media, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, self-representation, spaces of communication, religious communities

BIOGRAPHY

Marie-Therese Mäder is a teaching and research associate at the Centre for Religion, Economy and Politics and a member of the research group Media and Religion at the University of Zürich, Switzerland. Her monograph *Die Reise als Suche nach Orientierung*, published in 2012, explores the interface between film and religion in arthouse cinema. In 2015, she is a visiting scholar at the Comparative Media Studies/Writing department (CMS/W) at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, United States. Her current research deals with audio-visual media and their interactions with the (self-) representation strategies of religious communities in documentary media with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as a case study.

The public appearance of religious groups in the media has many different purposes, but one thing is clear: if you want to be noticed, you need to be present. Many religious communities have active agents in media production, as producers, directors and in front of or behind the camera. The religious institutions themselves often employ different kinds of media for diverse purposes, such as education, mission, information, exchange or self-representation. Likewise, members of religious communities use media for various reasons. For example, their consumption of the media in their leisure time may have no obvious relation to their religious affiliation, but they

may watch a specific film because the narration is compatible with the norms of their community. The field of media and religious communities is broad and complex. How can we deal methodologically with such a vast array of possible questions in light of the layers of interaction between religious communities, their representation in the media and the media? How do religious communities use media and how do the media represent religious communities?

The diversity of cases calls for a diversity of methods. But before I am able to discuss methods, I need to choose what I exactly want to examine and which questions are appropriate. This *axis of analysis* defines which theories and methods are suitable in light of the sources and the research question. On a systematic level, every *axis of analysis* is placed within at least one of four spaces in which the media are situated and which will be discussed in the following. With the definition of these four “spaces of communication”, I aim to systematise possible strategies for analysing the field. Methodologically, the concept of spaces of communication (*espaces de communication*) draws from the work of French communication scholar Roger Odin (2011). He explains that this semio-pragmatic communication model is non-communicative because the two spaces of sender and receiver are separated (“Il s’agit donc d’un modèle de non-communication”).¹ Despite their separation, they are connected in representation.

Odin also mentions the constraints that influence these communication processes, which I divide into (1) the *space of production* and (4) the *space of media communication* which define (2) the *space of representation*. These three spaces depend heavily on (3) the *space of distribution network and institutional framework for circulation*, a kind of connection between sender and receiver, between the *space of production* and the *space of media communication*, with each production reaching its audience through different transmission networks, for example television or the Internet. The following table summarises this discussion of the four spaces of communication (fig. 1).

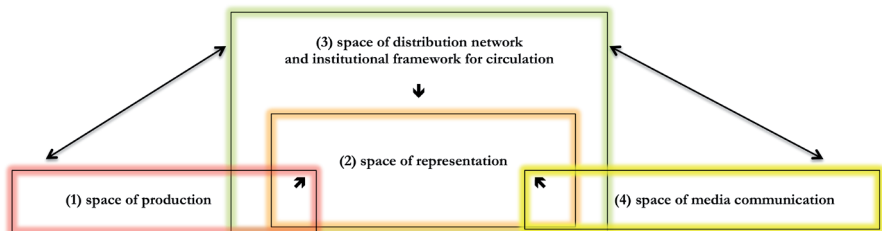


Fig. 1: The four spaces of communication

1 Odin 2011, 19.

Each space raises specific questions. For the space of production we might ask: Who are the producers? What kind of representational strategies are deployed and why? For the space of media communication, we might ask: For which audience is the source intended? Which communicative goal do the media pursue? There are several spaces of media communication when a single source of representation received by many different spectators in a plurality of contexts. One noteworthy situation in which this is not the case is with pictures or films shot with mobile phones. The producer and the receiver overlap when the material is kept private in the “ego space of communication”.² Then the whole process of media transmission is considered in the space of the distribution network and the institutional framework for circulation. Such networks are examined by asking where and by whom the media sources are distributed. And finally, stylistic and narrative questions interrogate the representation: From which perspective is the story told? What kind of stylistic means are used? How is the sound? How are gender differences depicted? Neither the questions nor the situations are predetermined by this model with its four spaces; they can be adjusted and extended.

But something that touches every space is that in each space people are involved as active agents. As soon as media sources are produced, distributed, circulated and received, they become into a phenomenon under constant construction. The active agents include the media sources, which participate in diverse meaning-making communication processes. And the different spaces overlap: production and circulation often take place within the same institutional framework; producers may also take part in the reception process; the audience may influence production and circulation processes. But the differentiation of these spaces on a systematic level makes it possible to compare the individual sources with one another and to identify the communication and construction strategies employed with regard to religion. Nevertheless, the focus on communication spaces of religions raises the need for further diversification.

As soon as we consider a concrete example in the realm of religion, the discussion becomes even more complex. Specific cultural settings, sources and, therefore, methodological approaches need to be taken into account because of the variety of institutions and agents involved. To address some of the issues raised by case studies, I will use the example of the commercial series entitled *I’M A MORMON*. The series has been distributed – and produced – by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) since 2010. Initially, these 174 single commercials were part of a bigger image campaign in which the church was relaunched in the media with a new and refreshed appearance. The distribution of this campaign has been focused on the Internet in particular³.

2 Odin 2014, 21.

3 Goodstein 2011, Haws 2013.

The aesthetic strategy is similar in every episode, which provides a recognition factor. The actors are socially diverse, but all are photogenic, pleasant, efficient, and successful in their occupations. And they are integrated into a “common” everyday life. They are shown with their families and at work. In both areas we see enthusiastic people performing designated roles, and, remarkably, no information is provided about their religious affiliation. Only at the end of the two to four minutes of every commercial we do hear and see the protagonists provide a kind of self-definition into the camera, as in the example of Mehrsa Bybee from 2011: “I’m an immigrant, I’m a not so tough law professor, I’m a mother, I’m someone who needs at least six hours of sleep – and I am not getting it. I am a psychiatrist to three of the cutest girls in the world. My name is Mehrsa and I’m a Mormon.”

The spaces of communication for the current example can be further *modified* in the light of the agents involved. The space of production induces an advertising mode that is operated by the LDS for the *I’m a Mormon* campaign. In this sense, it is also an identity-building mode for the church, which is represented by specific members. In the space of media communication, both members and non-members are addressed. For the first group the commercials work as self-affirmation; for the latter they form and transmit an image of open-minded, smart, successful, progressive and likeable Mormon members who function as role models for their community. Their mode in the production space is performative, as they are performing their role as LDS members in front of a camera for an audience. And finally, a documentary mode comes into play, which influences the space of production and media communication. It is crucial that the protagonists are credible and authentic for then the viewers will believe their statements and trust the attitudes and values that they represent. The documentary mode touches all four spaces at the same time and therefore deserves some further consideration.

The documentary mode provides information about the world in the form of an argument that the audience believes. And at the same time, as there is no objective information, the documentary mode is accompanied by a moral mode that creates values, which are often less obviously detectable. Questions beginning with “how” will often illuminate the displayed values, whereas typical “w”- questions, which begin with “what, who, when or where”, the facts of the documentary mode.

The concept of “documentary media” draws from the semio-pragmatic model of communication spaces previously discussed. Rather than adopt the binary categories “fiction” and “non-fiction”, we are encouraged through semio-pragmatics to construct the variety of situations in which communication takes place. One of these situations allows for a “documentary” (reading) mode. In the *I’m a Mormon* commercials, the impression is given that those who are portrayed – members of the Mormon church – are expressing their own opinions, imparting their own experiences, and providing their own insights about their attitudes toward life. The actors can even be

contacted through social media, as the addresses displayed at the end of each film suggest.

In a semio-pragmatic model, the spectators engagement with a documentary mode is independent from the producer's aim. Nevertheless, the production side seeks to influence the reception. Imagine you produce a documentary and nobody believes that the story is true. Therefore, the use of internal and external reading instructions comes into play. They follow certain conventions that help and at the same time influence the spectators in classifying what they see. Internal reading instructions could, for example, apply conventional codes referring to subgenres of documentary media like reality series, television series, documentaries and commercials, while at the same time leaving space for play with the stylistic convention of genres.

As I have shown, there are many spaces in the field of media and religion that can be explored. How we do so depends on our question. From quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to analysis of sources and context, there is a broad range of possible procedures. But the intersection and interplay between the spaces and their relationships with the representation need to be taken into account within each research process in the field of media and religion.

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