The history of the study of media and religion can be argued to have many beginnings depending on the disciplinary orientation guiding the interpretation. For an anthropologist of communication, rock paintings, smoke signals and ritual dance can well qualify as early examples of religious communication carried out via premodern media. For a theologian, handwritten sacred texts can represent the very starting point of the study of religion and (written) media. A media historian and a church historian might point to the development of the printing press in Gutenberg’s time and argue for its relevance in starting a new tradition of research investigating the relationship between religion (namely, Protestantism) and media (namely, the printing press; see, e.g., Eisenstein 1979; Meyer 2013; Stolow 2005). Moreover, the order in which these two concepts – religion and media – appear in research most likely varies by the scholarly orientation, that is, whether the main focus is on media or religion.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of some key developments in the field and to discuss them in the context of historical and theoretical developments relevant to the growth of this research field. In addition to an historical analysis of the development of the research field, two key theoretical frameworks are discussed: the study of religion in the public sphere and the study of mediatization of religion in late modern society. My approach to the study of media and religion (in this order) in this chapter is best characterised as interdisciplinary. Although I draw on various scholarly traditions, I mainly focus on and combine media and communication studies and sociology of religion. Theories are never created in a vacuum. I acknowledge that my scholarly thinking as a Nordic academic is influenced by European/Western social thought and related ideas about the role of religion (in particular Lutheran Church) and media (public broadcasting) in society. In this framework, the study of media and religion can be seen to evolve alongside the modernisation of Western society (embedded in secularisation) and the development of modern mass communication technology (newspapers first, followed by radio and finally television) and the related public sphere (Meyer and Moors 2006). In recent years, the digitalisation of communication has radically shaped the field, and concepts such as digital religion have gained emerging interest in the field, so we may call digital religion the third key theoretical framework in the study of media and religion (see, e.g., Campbell and Lövheim 2017).

I begin this chapter by providing a short overview of the history of the research field of media and religion. I then move to discuss in more detail how the concepts of the public sphere and mediatization have shaped research on media and religion.
The last section of this chapter focuses on reflecting on the present context of the global and digital media ecology and how it shapes current and future research on media and religion.

2 From Impact to Meaning – Two Key Phases in the History of the Field

The first phase of the study of media and religion is often referred to as the so-called mass communication era, which has its origins in the United States. In the 1960s, various evangelical dominations and churches with Protestant backgrounds in the United States began to purchase airtime from television stations. In the 1980s, some central themes in the field were the electronic church and the phenomenon of televangelism, which increased the visibility of religion in American media and made evangelicalism a potential worldview among others. Peter Horsfield’s Religious Television (1984) was a classic study in that era and looked at the phenomenon from the perspectives of media history and media culture and different religious communities’ theological viewpoints.

Research in this first phase typically was motivated by mass communication research, also called the MCR research tradition. Famous in the field of media studies, it had the aim to explore and explain media’s effects on their audiences and the surrounding society (Pietilä 2005). Many studies from this period focused on how religious messages could be most effectively delivered to audiences through media, particularly television. In this line of thinking, religion and media appeared to be independent, separate categories, and the role of media was understood to be primarily an instrument for delivering messages.

The beginning of the second phase of the study of media and religion can be dated to the 1990s. This phase was characterised by a desire to gain a wider understanding of both religion and media as social and cultural phenomena and categories. Thus, this intellectual tradition is often referred to as the media, religion, and culture paradigm. It was born from cooperation among certain Nordic (Alf Linderman and Knut Lundby), British (Jolyon Mitchell) and American (Stewart Hoover, David Morgan, and Lynn Schofield Clark) researchers. The key ideas of this school of thought were collected in the book Rethinking Media, Religion and Culture, published in 1997 and edited by Hoover and Lundby. Later, the Center for Media, Religion, and Culture, directed by Hoover at the University of Colorado, became one of the most important research centres in this field. This school of thought raised meaning as a key concept. Within the school, there was a debate between substantivist (often referring to institutional religion) and functionalist (focusing on religious practices and duties) conceptions of religion. There was also some shift from studying religion to studying religiosity. In this phase, it was crucial for researchers to study the kinds of forms religiosity took in media, who had the right to define reli-
gion, what was considered to be religious and how media made sense of religious practices.

Instead of studying traditional institutions, researchers in this strand focused on audiences and recipients and how people made sense of their lives in and through media. Rather than separate categories, media and religion appeared in this research tradition to be social and cultural phenomena intertwined in many ways. In media studies, this tradition drew ideas from the research field of cultural studies (see e.g., Pietilä 2005). Researchers were especially inspired by the ritual view of communication developed by a key figure in interpretive cultural studies, James Carey (1989). This idea emphasised the ritual significance of communication, referring to communication as a phenomenon that built community and kept it together. In the sociology of religion discourse, these ritual aspects of communication typically were interpreted as manifestations of functionalist religion (see, e.g., Hoover and Lundby 1997). Furthermore, media and communications studies scholar Roger Silverstone’s (1981) research applying theories of myth to study television and its role in everyday life was well received among scholars adhering to what was later called the media, religion, and culture paradigm. This school of thought inspired researchers to turn their gaze from institutional and organised religion to everyday life and its religious dimensions. This school marked a paradigm shift from the impact- to the meaning-oriented study of media (see e.g., Pietilä 2005).

3 Religion(s) in the Public Sphere

Other important factors to explain the key phases in the development of the research field of media and religion are the main conceptual debates and the different positions scholars in the field have taken in these debates. Perhaps the most important debate within European intellectual history deals with conceptualising the role and place of religion in modern public life. Philosopher and social theorist Jürgen Habermas is considered to be the most famous theoretician on the birth of the modern public sphere, which often is argued to be the most crucial arena of public life. Habermas ([1962] 1989) was especially interested in the public sphere in which issues of important public relevance such as politics were discussed. For Habermas, the press marked the public sphere. He considered a politically and religiously independent press to be a central factor in the birth of the modern public sphere. The press provided a platform for free social debate based on which citizens could participate in and commit to building a democratic society. This original public sphere theory thus downplayed the importance of religion in modern public life. Consequently, many studies discussing the role and place of religion in contemporary, secular Western news media considered religion to be a topic unimportant to modern secular news (Winston 2012).

Moreover, the idea of secularisation influenced not only the place of religion in news media but also the ways in which religion was covered and reported in the
news when it was given attention. As scholar of religion and news Diane Winston reminds us, “news is current and consequential information on matters that affect and interest its consumers” (Winston 2012, 5). The defining news criteria – impact, timeliness, prominence, proximity, bizarreness, conflict, and currency – are indirectly related to secularisation. Thus, if and when religion makes the news in secular media, it must meet these criteria, which explicitly influences the conditions under which religion makes the news (when it does!) in secular news media (Winston 2012, 5). Furthermore, according to Winston (2012, 14), secular news outlets often define religion in rather conventional and institutional terms. For example, in the news, Judaism is perceived as a religion, but extreme suffering is not, though they both share aspects of community, ritual and transcendence (Winston 2012). News on religion thus tends to focus on prominent religious institutions (e.g., large churches) and powerful people (e.g., the pope and the Dalai Lama) instead of small, marginal religious groups and their followers. This focus, of course, has the exception of violent religious movements and curiosities concerning religious practices that are considered to be bizarre in news media and make headlines in secular news media, such as polygamy in the Mormon religion and celebrity-driven scandals in Scientology.

With the rise of post-9/11 terrorism, the questions of radicalisation of religion and fundamentalism have invited scholars of media and religion to provide new explanations for the growing visibility of religion in the global and digital public sphere. An early explanation was given by Manuel Castells (1996), interpreting the rise of Muslim (but also Christian and Hindu) fundamentalism in the public sphere as a defensive reaction to insecurities and inequalities caused by globalisation and digitalisation. In more recent scholarly debates, Castells’ (1996) explanation has been challenged by more progressive views on Islam and the public sphere. For example, Eickelman and Anderson (2003) have argued for Islam’s constructive role in a transnational, even global public sphere in which Islam is seen to develop not against but with new digital media technologies. This view enables development of what can be called a Muslim public sphere in which new Muslim publics have new possibilities to challenge the authority of the state and more conventional religious authorities and to establish and maintain new transnational relations and forms of civil society (Meyer and Moors 2006, 5). In this frame of analysis, new public debates may emerge not only between Islam and the secular public sphere but also within the Muslim public sphere.

In recent years, the development of communication technologies, increasing multiculturalism of societies, growth of migration and globalisation of economics, politics and culture have challenged scholars of media and religion to re-think secularisation theory and the related place of religion in the public sphere (Walters and Kersley 2018). Consequently, Habermas (2006), as well as many of his colleagues and contemporaries, have reinterpreted the secularisation paradigm. For instance, José Casanova (1994) has had a central role in raising discussion on what kinds of conditions are set for practicing public religion. Birgit Meyer and Annelie Moors
(2006) have shaken up the secularisation paradigm and critiqued its inability to recognise religious phenomena in the public sphere. The discussion on the post-secular has also built new bridges for research oriented to sociology of religion in today's public sphere (Frisk and Nynäs 2012).

Within these discussions, an increasing number of scholars in media studies and the study of religion share the idea that on a global scale, the role and significance of religion have not merely decreased in the public sphere as assumed, and religion has not unequivocally shifted from the public sphere to the private sphere of the family as many scholars earlier predicted. The secular way of life has not gained a position as the global norm as once anticipated. The secularisation paradigm still has its supporters, of course, and its explanatory power is continuously debated in the field of the sociology of religion. In an example of this ongoing debate, in the book *Secularization*, Steve Bruce (2011) defends the theory's explanatory power when studying the role of religion in modern Western societies from the perspective of social structures and cultural changes.

### 4 Towards the Study of Mediatization of Religion

In addition to the vital debate on the role and place of religion in the public sphere, another key debate has emerged at the intersection of the study of media and religion. This debate was triggered by the concept, idea, and theory of mediatization (of religion). From the perspective of media studies, the mediatization agenda grew out of a need to better capture the significance of the all-encompassing presence of media in contemporary social life (see e.g., Couldry and Hepp 2017; Lundby 2014). Today, many scholars of media and religion agree that what we have witnessed over recent centuries is the growing media influence of religion in society (Hjarvard and Lövheim 2012). Mediatization, perceived as a process, is thought to have profoundly transformed the patterns of social interactions and the workings of social institutions in a given society. This development also applies to religion (Lundby 2018, 5). Mediatization theory was first used to analyse religion in the work of media scholar Stig Hjarvard (2016). Since then, it has had a strong influence in the study of media and religion in the Northern European Protestant context and within a certain type of public broadcasting media system (Hjarvard and Lövheim 2012). The application of mediatization theory to religion refers to the processes ‘through which religious beliefs, agency, and symbols are becoming influenced by the workings of various media’ (Hjarvard 2016, 8; see also Lövheim and Hjarvard 2019, 208). Moreover, as a theory, the mediatization of religion investigates how religion and related changes take place at the structural level (institutions) and the level of social interaction (practices; Lövheim and Hjarvard 2019, 208).

One key debate within research on the mediatization of religion has to do with whether mediatization reinforces the secularisation of society as it is argued to diminish the influence of religious institutions in society. The debate on *banal religion*...
resonates with the debate on secularisation. With this concept of banal religion, Hjarvard (2016) refers to various forms of popular religiosity that break away from institutions and different dogmatic systems and are typical of religious expressions produced and represented by media. Various film and book genres including supernatural elements, such as the vampire-themed Twilight Saga, are examples of banal religion in Hjarvard’s concept. A counterargument to this perception of banal religion highlights the concept’s lack of historical perspective (Lied 2012; Lövheim and Lynch 2011). As many scholars of ‘folk religion’ would argue, forms of religious beliefs and practices established and experienced in various non-institutional contexts have long existed side by side with institutional religions and often contesting orthodox religious dogma of representatives of religious institutions (see e.g., Uttriainen and Salmesvuori 2014). In this line of thinking, the different forms of banal religion do not indicate secularisation but, instead, the fragmentation, pluralisation and contestation of religious authority in society.

Yet another debate in the study of media and religion concerns the concept of mediatization or mediation (see e.g., Lundby 2014). Researchers who emphasise the mediated instead of the mediatized nature of religion and belief stress slightly different aspects than those working on the concept of mediatization. Representatives of the mediation school of thought include media scholars Hoover (2013) and Stolow (2005), anthropologist Meyer (2013) and material religion and visual studies scholar Morgan (2008). This school holds that all phenomena and cultural practices that are somehow religious in nature are bound to become mediated, whether in the form of texts, images or any material or immaterial means of communication. Instead of focusing on a particular medium (e.g., mass media), scholars interested in the mediation of religion pay attention to the mediation of meaning, that is, to meanings, places and practices linked to mediation and how they change in different contexts. This approach does not assume that modern media are exceptional but, instead, sees them as part of historical continuities and discontinuities (Hoover 2014; Martín-Barberon 1993). From the perspective of Hjarvard’s mediatization theory, the problem in the mediation of religion approach is that its broad definition of religion as a “culturally meaningful belief system” (Schofield Clark and Hoover 1997, 17) weakens its potential to analytically explain “how mediation shapes the particularities of religious beliefs, practices and organisations as forms of meaning making and social interaction” (Lövheim and Hjarvard 2019, 209).

From the perspective of observing religion in today’s society, one may conclude that both approaches – research emphasising mediatization or mediation – raise essential questions about the relationship between religion and media in the contemporary media-saturated society. It is impossible to interpret contemporary Western society without comprehending the processes of modernisation and their impacts shaping society, individuals, and different institutions. Thus, mediatization is a necessary concept for interpreting Western societies penetrated by modernisation on every level, but at the same time, the more subtle dynamics of the mediation of re-
ligiously inspired meanings in different places and practices should also be taken into consideration.

New research that analyses the mediatization of religion outside Western contexts also has made relevant contributions to bringing the two concepts into fruitful interplay. Patrick Eisenlohr’s (2017) research stands out as an example. His work on Islamic televangelism in India clarifies that it is important to analytically differentiate the mediatization of religion – or religion in the public sphere – connecting interactions between human actors through the circulation of religious discourse and images from the mediation of religion as interactions between human and divine actors. The level of mediatization thus depends on the interactions between public religion and religious mediation. Furthermore, Eisenlohr (2017) notes that in such contexts, religious mediation may also function as a form of resistance to changes induced by the use of media technology and related mediatization of religion (see also Lövheim and Hjarvard 2019). In recent years, radical changes in the media environment, namely, the vast influence of the Internet and social media, have challenged scholars of media and religion to begin to ask new questions about the relationship between media and religion in this digital age (Campbell and Lövheim 2017). The last section of this chapter focuses on the growing influence of the digitalisation of media communication in the study of media and religion.

5 Digital Media – Digital Religion

Today’s digital media environment can best be described as networked, fragmented and in constant flux. In this type of communication environment, local communication on religion intersects with national and global communication. Issues of power, structure, agency and authority related to religion are constantly re-negotiated as professional news media and journalism have lost the privilege to act as gatekeepers and agenda setters for the global flows of communication on religion (see e.g., Evolvı 2018; Sumiala et al. 2018).

Heidi Campbell’s (2017) work on digital religion is an important attempt to better grasp religion in the present media environment. According to Campbell (2017, 16): “digital religion explores the intersection of new media technologies, religion, and digital culture. It encompasses topics such as how religious communities engage with the Internet to ways religiosity is expressed through digital practices and the extent to which technological engagement can be seen as a spiritual enterprise.” Digital religion can be argued to exist in three particular ways. First, digital media characteristically generate new patterns of communication within religious groups and thus transform or even destabilise their traditional communication flows (Campbell 2017, 18). Second, digital media provide opportunities for digital religion to gain visibility in the digital public sphere and thus allow different religious communities and individuals to voice their views in ways not possible in the era characterised by mass communication (Campbell 2017, 18). Third, digital media shape religious authority as
digital religion has potential to destabilise the authority of traditional religious institutions and related actors (Campbell 2017, 19). Digital media, in this type of reading, can be argued, on one hand, to shape digital religion in ways that promise to give religion more visibility in the present digital media environment and related society. On the other hand, digital media also provide tools to challenge traditional religious authority and order and thus may well threaten religious institutions while making room for new types of religious activities and re-structuring of religious hierarchy.

In recent years, a key debate in digital religion studies has concerned the blending and blurring of what have been called the online and the offline religious spheres and how this intermingling of the online and the offline shapes existing religious practices and triggers new practices of spirituality (Campbell 2017). This debate has pushed scholars to further think about the interplay between the concepts of the digital and the religious. Following Hoover’s (2012, ix) insight, instead of simply looking at the “digitalisation of religion” – that is, how digital media push religious groups to adapt to changing conditions in approaching and practicing religion – scholars of digital religion should be more interested in considering “the actual contribution ‘the digital’ is making to ‘the religious’”. Lövheim and Campbell (2017, 11–12) reflected on the future of research on media and religion in today’s digital context and suggested that what is needed is a shift of perspective from looking at religious communities, organised religion and individual believers and their communicative practices to a more explicit focus on how other communities, organisations and individuals apply religious symbols and ideas in their communication and how these communicative practices shape the public presence of religion in the present digital sphere (see e.g., Evolvi 2018).

In concluding this chapter, I wish to illustrate how this shift in the study of media and religion can be applied in empirical research. A recently growing area of research on digital media and religion focuses on public controversies and contested religion in the present digital age (Lundby 2018; Sumiala 2017). A subarea in this research field looks at religiously inspired terrorist attacks as hybrid media events (Sumiala et al. 2018). This research strand gives special focus to the complex ways in which the phenomenon of religiously inspired terrorism circulates in various digital media platforms and how this flow of violence shapes the social construction of religion in the digital context. This research stream thus looks at not only the actors triggering communication on religion but also communicative structures and how they shape communication on religion. The hybrid concept is applied to emphasise how certain elements such as the multiplication of actors (e.g. journalists, ordinary media users, politicians, terrorists and nongovernmental organisations), diverse affordances (e.g., for different purposes for police and terrorists), constant fights over attention (e.g., professional news media and ordinary social media users), a strong emphasis on affective messages (e.g., memes and hashtags associated with religious meanings) and acceleration of communication (e.g., the intensified flow of messages across different platforms) all shape communication on religion and, consequently, affect the public presence of religion in the digital media environment,
thereby contributing to the social construction of Religion as a global threat (Sumiala et al. 2018). One of the main challenges for future research on digital media and religion is to better understand how such public understandings of religion may shape the role and place of not only particular religions but also religion in more general in the digitally saturated and highly mediatized public sphere we occupy today.

**Bibliography**


