Abstract: This study aims to demonstrate that media can achieve a religious construction of an event or issue and set the public sphere in a religious frame through the sacralization of events and persons. This perspective can be supported empirically by the studies showing the way in which mass media framed different events in a religious imaginary and language and proposed this image as a frame for public sphere debates and theoretically by the concepts of media events, mediatization, ritualization, and sacralization, in order to reveal the processes through which the translation from a secular discourse to a religious discourse is produced. Under certain circumstances, mass media work as an “as if” (metaphoric) religion, and the events are presented through a religious frame – through themes and figures that come from the religious sacred narratives. Journalists accomplish this by setting events and leaders within the symbolic frame specific to religion: within this framework, those who report the facts are using narratives close to hagiographic stories, and by this, they are accomplishing the sacralization of these events. This enables journalists to exert a “ritual mastery” over presenting the events and imposing its significations.

Keywords: religion, sacralization, public sphere, ritual mastery, media events

1 Introduction

Since the first publication of his seminal book on the public sphere, Habermas himself was a pioneer of reflection on his theories, and of the conceptual re-construction of the public sphere model. In each of these theoretical re-evaluations, Habermas traced the implications of social, political, technological transformations, and the new theoretical models associated with them on “the structural transformations of public sphere.” In the context of these debates, I am interested here in the relationship among the public sphere, mass media, and religion: my analysis aims to show that media can achieve a religious construction of an event or issue and set the public sphere in a religious discourse through the sacralization of events and persons. The following research questions are posed:

RQ1: What are the forms in which religion can appear in the mediatized public sphere?
RQ2: Which are the processes that, in certain situations, allow media cover specific events using a religious discourse?
RQ3: What would be the influence of this religious frame of events by media on the public sphere? To answer these questions, my argumentation will develop along the following logical lines:

(1) Religion appears in the public sphere also in other forms than those proposed by Habermas – as a tolerated discourse and as a discourse to be translated into secular language.

(2) Religion can appear in the public sphere as a structuring element of mass media discourse – the media coverage of events is a complex process, of symbolic re-construction of the facts, determined by the procedures, norms, and values of journalistic culture, and this means that journalists have and display control over this symbolic construction.

(3) In the case of certain events, journalists abandon the standard work norms and move to a hyperbolic, affective, and narrativized presentation of the facts – these are, according to Dayan and Katz, the “media events.” In a media event, journalists ritualize their behavior, in order to legitimize their performance – they thus obtain a “ritual mastery” over the coverage of events.

(4) In some media events, journalists sacralize the presentation of the events, using structures specific to hagiographic narratives. They now use a language loaded with terms with religious resonance, which causes the event to be promoted in the public sphere dressed in a religious discourse, as if it were a sacred fact.

For the purpose of this study, I use a synthetic definition of religion that encompasses both substantive and functional elements. A good example in this sense is the well-known definition of Clifford Geertz: “(1) a system of symbols (2) which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men (3) by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.” Since this investigation deals with a journalistic discourse dominated by religious themes, symbols, references, and not with religious institutions and manifestations, this definition is used as a generally accepted conceptual benchmark (which does not mean that I ignore the numerous debates regarding the definition of religion, either from the socio-anthropological, philosophical, or theological perspectives).

Regarding the concept of sacralization, for the discussion here, definitions that emphasize processes at the micro-social level are appropriate: “sacralization is the process by which the secular becomes sacred or other new forms of the sacred emerge, whether in matters of personal faith, institutional practice or political power.” For example, numerous studies deal with the sacralization of modern hero-martyrs, political leaders, or celebrities.

This study is part of the many debates about the relationship between the public sphere and religion. However, with a few exceptions, scholars have not been concerned with the role of mass media in this equation. This investigation will theoretically analyze this triad (religion, media, and public space) from the perspective of a processualist paradigm (with an emphasis on mediatization, ritualization, and sacralization), specific to media anthropology (Coman), and will debate the case studies (not very numerous) devoted to this relationship, thus covering the knowledge gap in this field. My objective is to provide a theoretical model, able to explain the phenomena of sacralization of some events through journalists’ discourse and, subsidiarily, the mechanisms through which the media can impose in the public sphere a religious framed version of events.

3 Habermas, “Religion in,” 11.
4 Dayan and Katz, Media Events.
5 Bell, Ritual Theory.
6 Geertz, The Interpretation, 74.
8 Wainwright, The Oxford.
9 Markham, “Theology;” Rončáková, “Media as Religion.”
12 Coman, “Cultural Anthropology.”
2 Religion and Public Sphere

In the context of the debates generated by the Habermasian model of the public sphere, in the most interesting re-evaluations of his “canonic” model, Habermas refers to the re-definition of religion’s role in contemporaneity and its place in the public sphere. Thus, Habermas¹³ considers that “the Occident’s own image of modernity seems, as in a psychological experiment, to undergo a switchover: the normal model for the future of all other cultures suddenly becomes a special-case scenario.” In this new stage, that he named post-secularism, religion integration in the public sphere is essential because:

Religious traditions have a special power to articulate moral intuitions, especially with regard to vulnerable forms of communal life. In the event of the corresponding political debates, this potential makes religious speech a serious candidate to transporting possible truth contents, which can then be translated from the vocabulary of a particular religious community into a generally accessible language.¹⁴

Consequently, religion cannot be excluded from the public arena, and a mode and model of dialogue must be found. Habermas¹⁵ argues that the integration of religion in the public sphere can be done through: laic participants’ availability to tolerate, in a debate, different positions based on the truths (indisputable for believers) of the dogma (“the epistemic ability to consider one’s own faith reflectively from the outside and to relate it to secular views”); and through the effort to translate the dogma in rational formulas (“this requirement of translation must be conceived as a cooperative task in which the non-religious citizens must likewise participate”). Through these deliberative procedures, religion (or more precisely, the discourse based on religious beliefs) finds a place in the post-secular public sphere, but without changing its specific conceptual coordinates.

This reinterpretation of the relationship between religion and public sphere generated, in turn, numerous debates. Some studies are positioned in the “normative” register, specific to Habermas’ philosophy, either bringing new arguments for the validation of this model¹⁶ or revealing what they consider to be some theoretical incongruences of the new theory¹⁷; few of them are bringing case studies to validate the new model¹⁸; none of these case studies analyze media as a major actor in the integration of religion in the public space. All these analyses and case studies share a common trait – they do not overcome the Habermasian model. They accept Habermas axiom: even in the post-secularism era, religion still occupies a marginal position in the post-modern society’s architecture. Consequently, the theoretical constructions concentrate on strategies for accepting and integrating (translating) the religious discourse in the secular public sphere. I could not identify any studies that would propose the development of the Habermasian model, and in other words, that would construct (on normative and/or empirical bases) a model in which religion is not only a tolerated discourse in the public sphere but also a constitutive factor of the public sphere.

3 The Religious Construction of a Political Public Sphere

In the first step, it can be assumed that the most important factor in the creation of a religious public sphere is the processes of mediation and mediatization through which the communication is built in the various public spheres. This implies an understanding of religion as a language that generates a specific public

¹³ Habermas, “Religion in,” 2.
¹⁴ Ibid., 10.
¹⁵ Ibid., 11.
sphere and analyzing its relationship with other mediatization systems, specifically with mass media. In the second step, it can be assumed that under certain circumstances, the mediatization is associated with ritualization of journalistic performance and the sacralization of the news stories. It seems that this type of sacralization is the result of such an unusual process of mediatization of an event and/or personality. On the other hand, religion as well as mass media are important meaning-makers, offering symbolic constructs that structure our worldview. Moreover, both have the power to con-sacrate people, places, moments of history, ideas, and institutions.

Inspired by the theology of Hent de Vries, Brigitte Meyer considers that religion can be best understood as “a practice of mediation” between humanity and transcendence. As a consequence, the issue of “religion AND media” has to be reframed: “religion AS media”; the access to transcendence is shaped by the media that bridges it and that, structuring the experience of transcendental becomes the source of “authentic religious experiences.” If religion is/can be understood as a practice of mediation, different types of media, including mass media, appear as an inalienable condition on which any attempt to access and render present the divine and to communicate among religious practitioners ultimately depends. But if the media (and specifically mass media) are the message, would it be possible to think from a reverse angle: Could mass media work as (an as-if) religion?

In fact, in the analyses of Charismatic Pentecostal television performances, Meyer uses the concept of mediation less in the broad sense of translation of the information according to the characteristic of a specific medium of transmission, and more in the strict sense of mediatization. Mediatization “refers to a more long-term process, whereby social and cultural institutions and modes of interaction are changed as a consequence of the growth of media’s influence.” This concept, born in and developed for media studies, was transformed into a theoretical model for religious studies by Stig Hjarvard and it triggered intense debates. From this perspective, religion and mass media are “in a kind of dialectical relationship and that it is not possible to understand either fully without reference to the other.” On the other hand, religion as well as mass media are important meaning-makers, offering symbolic constructs (mythical narratives, ritual behaviors, sacred values) that structure our worldview. Moreover, both have the power to con-sacrate people, places, moments of history, ideas, and institutions. Under these conditions, the media appear as the social and cultural agency that shapes religion and possibly (especially in Couldry’s interpretation), as the new church of postmodernity, which establishes and controls modern forms of sacredness, which self-hypostasizes in the (new) sacred center of the world: “Like the sacred-profane distinction, the media-ordinary distinction divides the social world into two domains which are normally separated. Meeting between the two worlds must, therefore, be ritually controlled.” The sacred-profane opposition is substituted by mediated–non-mediated moments of life and is naturalized by various symbolic instances so that the society becomes unaware that this relationship was construed in a social way, and it masks significant power relationships. Couldry suggestion is to accept the conflictual (marxist) perspective as an essential element of a media ritual theory: rituals as well as mass media products are symbolic tools to express and naturalize media as the society’s power center – “media rituals are formal means of making media power seems natural.”

19 Coman, “Cultural Anthropology.”
20 Meyer, “Introduction.”
24 Hjarvard, The Mediatization of Culture.
26 Hoover, “Media and the Imagination,” 613.
27 Couldry, Media Rituals.
28 Ibid., 44.
29 Ibid., 120.
4 Media Events

The concept of media ritual is a development of an already classical concept: media events: “The conferral of media event status on a given occasion consists in pulling it away from the news and translating it in a fictional register. The result is a text which neutralizes the opposition between fiction and news.”30 The opposition between common mass media situations and discourse and “unusual” situations and discourse resumes Durkheim’s opposition between the sacred and the profane: media events are for the normal press what the celebration is for everyday life. Such phenomena lead to: (1) restoring social networks or even creating new networks; (2) emotional experiences of great intensity; (3) generating new topics that strengthen collective memory, ensuring social integration and consensus; (4) (usually ceremonial) participation and involvement in the covered event; and (5) promoting home as “public place,” namely, the place of participation in key political moments, debates, and decisions.31

In the face of this model in which certain characteristics of ceremonies enlighten the concept of event and create specific categories, we may ask ourselves if this type of public action is related to the ritualization of political acts or to the ritualization of journalistic coverage; in other words, if we deal with a political ritual or with a mere “mis-en-scene” of journalistic performance. To answer this question, Dayan and Katz suggest that some media events are called upon to solve crises. Referring to these specific events–ceremonies, Dayan and Katz label them as transformative events: “Transformative media ceremonies (1) address a latent conflict, (2) by enacting within themselves a reorganization of time and space – that is of history and geography, (3) thus making formerly unthinkable solutions thinkable.”32 Transformative events are media constructs that re-organize facts in a sequential narrative structure: the existence of a problem considered insoluble and accepted as fatality; the announcement of a ceremonial event that will offer a way toward change; the display of a performance, in a dramatic context, which interpreted by media as “an illustration of a desired state of affairs”; this reading of the facts offer a meaning to the events and pre-defines the manner of reception; after that, the public is invited to meditate on the proposed model and to evaluate its effects.33

In this equation, mass media play an ambiguous role: in certain cases (and implicitly) interpretations, it is defined as an instrument for intensifying the capacity of social dissemination of a ceremonial event; in these situations, it does not transform either the essence of ceremony or the configuration of the event – its role is to increase the number of those participating (emotionally and perhaps physically) in the ceremonial event, as well as the intensity of feeling generated by their involvement in the ceremony. In other cases, mass media are interpreted as ceremony-generating force: it has the capacity to introduce ritual elements and experiences into the configuration of events which the community did not perceive as rituals. Now journalists’ role is to create and legitimize meanings, so far difficult to accept at the level of society. As a result, mass media become instrument of social change, it generates liminal intervals, of reflection and acceptance of change, which allow the escape from a difficult situation and the integration into a state of equilibrium.

Transformative media events are in an ambiguous relationship with what Mortensen34 called “conflictual media events,” another label for what earlier Carey called “media episodes of shame and degradation”35 and Liebes called “disaster marathons”; it is about media events associated with events that do not confirm the social order, but promote crises, social tensions, and conflicts. In these cases, the ritualization of the journalistic coverage of the events and their presentation in narratives loaded with mythological symbols does not seem to lead (as in the case of transformative media events) to a vision of society based on

30 Dayan and Katz, Media Events, 114.
31 Ibid., 14–23.
32 Ibid., 160.
33 Ibid., 167–8.
34 Mortensen, “Conflictual.”
35 Carey, “Political Ritual.”
36 Liebes, “Disaster Marathons.”
balance and solidarity. These “bitter” media events leave no room for the sacralization of the everyday, nor for the promotion of the mass media as the sacred center of society.

5 The Sacralization of Significant Events

Most often the symbolic constructs invade the journalistic discourse in the case of unusual events. Now the sacralization of leaders or/and events structures facts in narratives that, even if volatile, offer accessible intelligibility grids; at the same time, it re-structures the society’s system of representations, offering symbolical configurations that are convenient and negotiable. Therefore, it builds the bases for discussions in the multiple contemporary public spheres.

Sacralization is, in a certain sense, a mechanism of de-referentiality, even though journalists keep the external cues of referentiality (invoking or citing sources, miming equidistance, balancing voices, etc.). The stories thus constructed send more to characters, epical schemes, values, symbols from the religious vocabulary of the public and much less to the facts, actors, motives, and social mechanism from that specific situation. The sacralization of the events is associated with the ritualization of the journalists’ behavior. In Bell’s terms, they exercise “ritual mastery.” Journalists present the facts as if they reveal a sacred dimension of the world and as if the only ones who have access to this revelation are only, they, the journalists. The sacralization of the media coverage of an event arises when journalists feel the need to attribute a heightened significance to what happened: placing an event, through hagiographic narratives, on the limit between the contingent and transcendental world leads to a transposal of the events in another system of significances, accessible (only) to them. I will take as an illustration the sacralization of a Romanian political leader in media discourse.

From the perspective of the media events theory, it is obvious that Corneliu Coposu’s funeral triggered a media event in the category of the consecration. In general, death and funerals of important leaders generate a media coverage of the media event type. The constitutive elements of a media event are visible in the use of large numbers: the number of attendants to the funeral (over 100,000), the description of the long queue formed by those who had come to pay their respect, the detailed presentation of the dozens of memorial museums, as well as numerous exaggerations which had no basis in terms of journalistic accuracy. But media discourse or more than a description of the funeral, it was a form of sacralization: “A sacred moment, of national recollection...it was a day of divine grace. The endless procession accompanying ‘the Senior’ on his final road was the proof of a divine phenomenon: we have had amongst us not only an unparalleled politician, but an apostle” (România liberă, 15.11. 1995); “Made from the royal spirit of this nation, Corneliu Coposu climbed the Golgotha of suffering in the name of a nation for which the belief in God and the fight against the Godless has become the very substance of its existence” (Cronica Romana, 15.11.95); “All those who treasured him know that he now sits at the right hand of the Father, where only the chosen spirit get” (România liberă, 15.11.1995); “Just as world leaders have said these days, taking a bow before the serene Martyr, Mr Coposu holds a special place in the political history of the world... because – an unprecedented fact – he sanctified a party. He placed it in eternity. He turned it into a guide in times of sufferings, following the footsteps of the apostles Maniu and Mihalache, of the many martyrs killed in the

37 Coman, Pour une Anthropologie des Medias.
38 Bell, Ritual Theory.
39 Dayan and Katz, Media Events.
communist prisons” (Adevårul, 16.11.1995); “Corneliu Coposu bore a visible stigmata: that of the political mission” (Curierul Național, 14.11.1995). All these passages point out the journalists’ tendency to depict Coposu in religious terms (martyr, apostle, saint), to describe the funeral as a hierophany, as a moment and proof of communication between the earthly world and the divine one. The difference between our perspective and other analyses, focused on other social agencies which are considered primary factors in the symbolical construction of the death of a personality,⁴¹ is that we stressed the role of media in the construction of a sacralized version of reality.

Some other examples are as follows: the electoral campaign of the future President of Ukraine, Victor Iouchtchenko, was described through numerous evangelical images: the visit to his mother’s house leads to her description as the Good Mother who endures suffering in an electoral campaign presented as a path of the Cross so that her son can accomplish his divine mission (Iouchtchenko was poisoned and close to death). Another visit to the Hoverla mountain is presented as a miracle of the transfiguration on Mount Tabor, in which Iouchtchenko abandons the profane colors (the ones of the Ukrainian flag) and chooses as a personal symbol the color of gold. His election victory appears as a miracle and as a resurrection of the country.⁴² The visit of King Mihai to Romania, 2 years after the fall of communism, was presented by the printed press in the religious language of the hierophany and salvation. The King appears as a Jesus descending to bring the healing and resurrection of the country, and his visit is described as “a sign that Romania is no longer omitted from God’s plans.”⁴³ The discourse and iconography from Pakistani mass media translate the life and death of Benazir Bhutto from the political code into religious code, transforming the political victim into a political martyr and then into a “secular saint.”⁴⁴ Upon the death of Francois Mitterand journalists used religious vocabulary to describe his eternal achievements: “We had a saint amongst us and we did not know” or “Francois Mitterand’s death is seen, in a strange manner, as an apparition: a shrine is built for the statesman, in the spirit of a communion with the saints.”⁴⁵

The funeral of the President of Poland and 20 dignitaries killed in the plane crash in Smolensk was presented by the Polish mass media as a transformative media event, focused on the myth of heroic sacrifice for the homeland and that of the nation surrounded by enemies. The dead president is sacralized, thus becoming “a sacrificial figure on a mission to preserve the traditional values of faithfulness to the national memory.”⁴⁶ Apart from these brief examples, numerous other analyses reveal the processes of media sacralization of some political leaders or the victims of political struggles, presented as martyrs⁴⁷ whose sacrifice is narrated in terms of foundational myths of a community.

6 Conclusions and Limitations

This discussion began from Habermas’ attempt to bridge the public sphere and religion; in his theoretical model, religion is can be tolerated through an effort of adaptation of secular participants to the religious language and its translation through the frames of rationality specific to the public sphere debates. The main research question was: Would it be possible to think from a reverse angle so that the public sphere is could be constructed within a religious frame? This perspective can be supported empirically by the studies showing the way in which mass media framed different events in a religious imaginary and language and

⁴² Dounaevsky and Albertini, “L’Evenement.”
⁴³ Coman, Pour une Anthropologie.
⁴⁴ Boivin and Delage, “Benazir.”
⁴⁵ Yonnet, “Je ne Vous Quitterai pas,” 2.
proposed this image as a frame for public sphere debates and theoretically by the concepts of media events, mediatization, ritualization, and sacralization, in order to reveal the processes through which the translation from a secular discourse to a religious discourse is produced.

Due to the privileged position held in relation to the audience and the events, due to the power of providing and imposing versions that are acceptable (in the cultural references system of that audience) of the events in point, as well as due to the capacity of attributing significations that shape the social imaginary, journalists exert a ritual mastery⁴⁸ on defining reality. If we look at journalists’ conduct from this performative perspective, we understand that ritualization is a mechanism by which they can capitalize, in the act of communication, on their social position and role, presenting themselves in instances that mark and legitimize the social difference that provides them, albeit for a short period of time, a ritual mastery over the debates and interpretation of events of great importance for the society. It enables journalists to exert a major control over the process of building a version of the reality and to present themselves as Dayan and Katz put it: “donors of the event.”⁴⁹

Placing an event, through hagiographic narratives, on the limit between the contingent and transcendental world leads to a transposal of the events in another system of references: the story media tell gains meaning not only from the perspective of the contingent horizon but also from the perspective of the transcendent. The news stories are presented as if they represent an element of a revelation and its heroes are con-sacrated, on a symbolic horizon where we can find the great figures of the respective religions.

Another research question was about the capacity of media to perform and generate a certain kind of religiosity. The construction of the event in religious language is born and remains only in the discourse of the press, and it is not transformed into ritualistic actions, forms of clerical organization, or into faith. The religious symbolistic does not refer to a religious manifestation, but it is significant through which can be said something that is not religious (in the canonical sense) and cannot be expressed in another code. In the felicitous formula of Beyer⁵⁰:

It is, however, clear that such sacralization largely escapes institutionalized religion: these matters are at most thematized there, interpreted in terms of religious meaning systems; they do not themselves constitute religion or religions as a specialized institution. Again, as with the other examples, important structures and processes that in some respects “look” like religion, escape institutional religion. They do not have the characteristic features of explicit and elaborated transcendent reference, they are not embodied in systematic programmes of belief and practice, and they have little communal manifestation.

The last research question was: What would be the influence of the religious construction of an event on the public sphere? In other words, if a religious matrix frame the mediatized representation about those issues, does this place the debate (in the public sphere) in the framework of the religious discourse? The debate would not be now one about religion or a religious event, nor one with church representatives or with faithful persons (that has to be translate), but one about profane events presented and signified with the help of certain religious symbols. Future studies would establish the correlation between these processes of the ritualized construction of an event or person (political leader, hero, celebrity, etc.), the processes of sacralization done in and through various forms of popular culture, and the debates in such a public sphere. This would mean that after generating public spheres that are constituted by religious imagery, the process continued in other cultural spaces, also marked by a religious vision on that event or person.

In order to support the theoretical model proposed here, other public spheres generated by such mediatizations should be investigated: analyses devoted to certain non-western events and their media coverage could offer more case studies of religious mediatization and religious constructed public spheres. The current literature suggests that these processes are much more obvious in cultures characterized by the

---

traditions of Orthodox Christianity or of Islamism; however, the limited number of case studies does not permit a valid generalization.

Funding information: The author states no funding involved.

Conflict of interest: The author states no conflict of interest.

References


