

# Representation of Islam in Swiss media

**Working Paper, produced after the informal meeting between experts in communication and media science and representatives of the public authorities (Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs) on June 29, 2010 in Bern**

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## Management Summary

This working paper presents results from two communication research projects from the University of Zurich and the University of Fribourg that investigated the representation of Islam in Swiss media.

The Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) has invited two research groups to develop this working paper on the background of the FDFA-project "promoting coexistence: dialogue with the media" that aims at promoting and initiating a dialogue between concerned stakeholders. In a world of multiple religious references and different worldviews, the FDFA together with other Swiss actors and the UN Alliance of Civilizations reflects on the modalities of promoting coexistence between communities with different worldviews, both abroad and in Switzerland. Furthermore, the FDFA was interested to learn about the need for action and about possible means for the promotion of a dialogue between the various stakeholders.

The two research projects followed different, but complementary research approaches: The project from the University of Zurich was combining several research methods (interviews with journalists and representatives of religious organisations plus a media content analysis of news formats in newspaper, radio and TV). The project from the University of Fribourg was focusing on the representation of religions in TV and its various genres (news, entertainment).

Results: Despite the methodological differences between the two projects, they found very similar results. Islam receives a relatively high media attention. However, the media focus is not on Islam in Switzerland, but Islam abroad. Islam remains primarily a confrontation with the "Other" or the "Foreigner". Therefore, reporting on Islamic issues usually focuses on problems, controversy and often also on politics. The journalistic representations of Islam are characterized by negativism. The media rarely show an in-depth exploration of Islam. Muslim actors are rarely actors from civil society, but mainly religious and political actors who are presented in a mostly passive role.

The authors conclude with some recommendations: The currently routine media coverage of Islam results in a negative media image. Overcoming these routines requires conscious learning efforts and reflexivity from the media. Efforts are needed from both sides (religion and media) in order to strengthen and improve the representation of Islam in Swiss media. A key area of action is training an education of the (semi-)professionals on both sides. The media should give more attention on news factors such as cultural proximity, personalization and predictability (routine coverage of religious rituals) that might help to shed a different light on Islam. A stronger emphasis should be put on the daily life of (Swiss) Islam, which is currently only a marginal theme.

A prerequisite for these changes is the willingness and the ability of (Swiss) Muslims to present themselves and their culture (values, positions on contested issue, lifestyle etc.) in the media. Therefore, Muslim organizations and individuals should be motivated and supported to actively develop their media relations in order to have a say on their media representation.

## 1 Introduction

The mass media play an important role for the public image of Islam in western societies. Research in Switzerland and abroad has shown that there is an imbalance in the way the media cover and represent Islam compared to other religions. On that background, the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) has started the project "promoting coexistence: dialogue with the media" that aims at promoting and initiating a dialogue between concerned stakeholders. In a world of multiple religious references and different worldviews, the FDFA together with other Swiss actors and the UN Alliance of Civilizations reflects on the modalities of promoting coexistence between communities with different worldviews, both abroad and in Switzerland, and is interested, as such, in the role and responsibility of the media in fostering coexistence in multicultural societies.

The FDFA has invited two communication research groups involved in the media module of the National Research program 58 "Religions, the State, and Society" (see <http://www.nfp58.ch>) to present their research findings concerning the media representation of Islam, its evaluation and its potential effects on the public perception of Islam. The two research projects were selected because they were able to present findings on the current situation and because their research approaches were complementary: The project from the University of Zurich was combining several research methods (interviews with journalists and representatives of religious organisations plus a media content analysis of news formats in newspaper, radio and TV). The project from the University of Fribourg was focusing on the representation of religions in TV and its various genres (e.g. news, entertainment). Furthermore, the FDFA was interested to learn about the need for action and about possible means for the promotion of a dialogue between the various stakeholders.

This working paper summarizes the key points of the presentations at the informal workshop that took place on June 29 2010 in Bern and gives access to the related publications of the projects (see literature for further references).

Before entering into the substantive discussion, it is helpful to have some statistical information about the religious landscape in Switzerland: According to the Federal Office of Statistics (Baumann/Stolz 2007: 40) Switzerland is still a predominantly Christian society with 74.9% membership in the two large churches (41.8% roman-catholic, 33% protestant). The second largest group (15.5% of the population) is not a member of a religious organization. Muslims represent the third largest religious group in Switzerland with 4.3% members in the population. Furthermore, there is a long-term trend towards a multi-religious society, which is associated with a decreasing relevance of the churches and an increasing frequency of culturally "new" religions (Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism) and inhabitants without any membership in religious organizations.

This working paper is structured in the following way: Section 2 will present the research questions, the research design and the results from the Fribourg project. Section 3 will provide the same information on the Zurich project. Section 4 discusses these findings and presents some conclusions and recommendations.

## 2 Project from the University of Fribourg

The results of studies conducted to date on the media representation of religions correspond, as far as statements about the representation of *religious* minorities such as Muslims is concerned (Hafez 2002; Poole 2000; Schiffer 2004; Vliegenthart/Roggeband 2007), with the results of studies on the media reporting of *ethnic* minorities: i.e. associated with conflict, crime or harm (Meissner/Ruhrmann 2000). Positive or "neutral" reporting is rare. Moreover, ethnic minorities are generally only given a passive role, i.e. they are rarely allowed to speak for themselves (Bonfadelli/Moser 2007; ter Wal et al. 2005). Similar results are found in the above-mentioned studies on the representation of Islam.

Studies on the representation of other non-Christian religions in the mass media are few and far between. These highlight specific aspects, such as the typing of Jewish players in the media (Meier et al. 2004) or the media career of the Dalai Lama (Kurzke 2009). These studies show that, by and large, the media represent these religions in a more positive light than Islam.

Following up on the results of these studies, the research project *Religion(s) on Television* analysed the thematisation and representation of religion(s) in all programming areas. The focus of the research was both on information and entertainment programmes as well as on commercials and promotional programming.

### 2.1 Research design and methodology

The research material covered two natural calendar weeks (spring and autumn 2008) of the first channels of SRG SSR idée suisse (SF1, TSR1 und TSI1)<sup>1</sup> as well as two private TV channels (TeleBärn und TeleZüri). A total of 1680 hours of programming (14 days x 24h x 5 programmes) were analysed using qualitative and quantitative methods (Schönhagen/Jecker 2010). The main question the research project aimed to answer was: how are religion, religiosity and religious communities thematised on Swiss television? This main question was split into further sub-questions. In this working paper, we will present some selected results concerning the thematisation frequency of the various religions, the thematic context (e.g. politics and law, living environment etc.), the thematic focus (e.g. norms and values), the religious dimensions (e.g. rituals, material dimensions), the type of actors (e.g. religious, political, other) and the news factors (e.g. negativity/harm, conflict).

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<sup>1</sup> Since 1 March 2009, the TV channel TSI1 has been known under the new name of RSI La1. Below, we continue to use the old name TSI1 because this was the official name during the sample programming weeks.

## 2.2. Results

The first important result of the quantitative content analysis is that religions are ubiquitous in Switzerland's daily TV programming, albeit usually implicitly. This is shown by a comprehensive analysis that tagged all TV programmes and reports that contained at least one identifiable religious symbol: from a sportsperson's cross pendant to a mosque as an architectural artefact. Based on this very open coding system, on average some religion-related content was found in almost half of the study units (48%) across all types of TV programming (TV journalism, entertainment, commercials, etc.).

The other results refer only to the 275 programmes and reports of the SRG channels studied which explicitly deal with religion or religious communities and/or their representatives as a main or secondary theme.<sup>2</sup> In view of the FDFA's main focus of interest, the following results refer mainly to Islam. The findings are compared with Switzerland's majority religion, Christianity, as a reference value.<sup>3</sup>

### Thematisation frequency

SRG channels most frequently have Christianity as their theme (52%), followed by Islam (12%), Judaism (5%), Buddhism (4%) and Hinduism (3%). This media frequency distribution stands in contrast to the distribution of these religions in the Swiss population (see introduction). In the narrow statistical sense Christianity as the largest religious group (74,9% share in the population) is under-represented in the media and all smaller religious groups are overrepresented. This over-representation in the media is the highest for Islam (12% in media vs. 4,3% in the population). Nevertheless, the frequency ranking order in the media (Christianity first, Islam second etc.) corresponds to the distribution of these religions in this country. If we compare Islam with Christianity and inquire how frequently these religions feature in information programming (e.g. news and political/current affairs programmes) and entertainment (e.g. movies, game shows), a first striking difference is evident: whereas Christianity features in two-thirds of both types of programming (64% and 66%, respectively), Islam is featured more frequently in information than in entertainment programming (18% vs. 10%).

### Thematic Context

Also interesting are the thematic contexts in which religions are embedded in SRG programming. The most frequently analysed context is the *living environment* (39%), which includes programmes about personal life, death, lifestyle and religious life. Next come programmes about religions in the context of *politics and law* (22%).

Interesting differences emerge when comparing religions: 40% of TV reports with Christianity as their theme have a *living environment* context and 21% have a *political-legal* context. In reports about Islam, the opposite is the case: here the *political-legal* context (39%) is dominant and the *living environment* context only involves a quarter of programmes. It is also interesting that Islam is the theme twice as often as Christianity (16% vs. 8%) in a *historical* context. The opposite is the case again in the thematic context of *culture* (6% vs. 12%).

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<sup>2</sup> Due to the many reruns in the two private channels that were selected, the sample included only six different programmes with a religion-related content. Because this number is much too small for an in-depth quantitative analysis, TeleBärn and TeleZüri could not be taken into account in the detailed content analysis.

<sup>3</sup> Additional results will be published in an anthology by Constanze Jecker (2011: Religionen im Fernsehen. Fakten, Analysen, Perspektiven. Konstanz: UVK) and in a dissertation by Veronika Favre.

### Thematic Focus

In addition to the thematic contexts, the study also examines what is the centre or focus of TV reports whose theme is religion. Since a maximum of three religions were recorded per report, multiple codings were possible here as well.

An analysis of the *number of TV reports* yields the following findings: 37% of reports with a focus on Islam contain *conflicts with a religious aspect*, compared with only 4% in the case of reports focusing on Christianity. If the *length of the reports* is considered, a very different picture emerges: there is almost no difference in the relative shares of Christianity and Islam (6% vs. 8%). Based on previous studies, it was expected that this value (i.e. the difference) would be greater. Here, however, it emerges that *conflicts with a religious aspect* are rarely the main focus in the representation of religions. This means that although there are more reports about conflicts in the context of Islam, they are substantially shorter than reports with a different thematic focus. Moreover, as will be shown below, the share of reports in which conflicts are not the main focus is significantly larger (cf. section on *News Factors*).

In addition, the most frequent thematic focuses are *transition rituals* (e.g. religious weddings, baptisms), which account for 17%, and *norms/values* (e.g. topics such as euthanasia, abortion), which account for 20%. When TV reports focus on *transition rituals*, Christianity and Islam have identical shares, i.e. 29% respectively. When the focus is on *norms/values*, a big difference is seen again: 20% of reports whose theme is Christianity focus on norms/values, compared with only 8% for Islam.

### Religious dimensions

This is the first study that identifies religious dimensions (norms, symbols, myths, rituals, etc.) in Swiss TV programming. It helps to answer the question of to what extent the Swiss TV programmes examined differ in their presentation of religion-specific characteristics of the various communities. To examine the religious dimensions, the study borrowed the relevant concept from Ninian Smart (1997). This facilitates a structured analysis of the specific characteristics of religions. An analysis of the content of the programming shows that the religious dimensions that lend themselves particularly well to narrative representation on television (e.g. rituals) are featured much more frequently than substantive dimensions (e.g. ethics) which actually have a much more fundamental significance for religions.

A comparison of Christianity and Islam again shows revealing differences: for example, the material dimension (e.g. buildings and symbols) appears more often in presentations of Christianity than of Islam (72% vs. 57%). The difference between the two religions is much greater, namely 64% vs. 14%, with respect to the ritual dimension (e.g. prayer, worship). Both these findings are attributable to the fact that these dimensions are closely connected to the culture of a particular society. In other words, Christianity, which is an integral part of Swiss culture with deep historical roots in this country, is ubiquitous and more present on a daily basis than Islam in television programmes.

In contrast, the ethical/doctrinal dimension (e.g. Koran, Bible) is found approximately twice as often in the representation of Islam than of Christianity (31% vs. 16%). This result needs to be interpreted in the context of the current mass media discourse, which often addresses the rules and regulations of Islam, such as the wearing of veils or headscarves.

### Actors

For programmes or reports with a religion-related context, the three main actors were recorded in each case. These were divided into religious (e.g. imam, bishop), political (e.g. Federal Councillor), social (e.g.

artist) and other actors (e.g. father, passerby). A total of 228 religious actors were recorded in 275 TV reports with religion as the main or secondary theme. When all religions are considered in the evaluation, we can conclude that in SRG TV programmes *religious* actors mainly appear as individual actors, they mostly have an international or local significance and they are shown in their religious function (e.g. Catholic priest from Fribourg).

When Muslim *religious* actors are compared with Christian *religious* actors, no marked difference emerges in this respect (66% vs. 60%). The difference among *other* actors is also small (57% vs. 61%). But for the two other types of actors major differences emerge: in reports that have Islam as their theme, *political* actors appear twice as frequently as in reports in which the theme is Christianity (57% vs. 25%). The inverse ratio is seen in the case of *social* actors (17% vs. 40%). The former is due primarily to foreign reporting, which mainly focuses on the thematic context of *politics and law* (see *Thematic Context* section above). The latter is probably related to Islam's lack of roots in civil society in Switzerland (cf. *Religious Dimensions* section).

### News factors

News factors enable us to capture the characteristics of an event which influence journalistic choices. They can therefore be used to ascertain the criteria according to which journalists select themes for their reports. The study recorded a maximum of the three most central news factors of a report. The following results refer to the news factors of *conflict* and *negativity/harm* in television journalism (e.g. news, talk shows, current affairs programmes, documentaries): the *conflict* news factor was identified in 37% and the *negativity/harm* factor in 29% of reports whose main or secondary theme was religion. A comparison between Islam and Christianity again shows large differences: in 80% of reports whose theme was Islam, the *conflict* news factor was identified, compared with only 32% for reports focusing on Christianity. The difference was slightly smaller with respect to the *negativity/harm* news factor, but it was still striking (48% vs. 29%).

### **3 Project from the University of Zurich**

#### **3.1 Research questions**

The project from the University of Zurich was investigation the following three research questions:

1. How are religious organization (e.g. churches, Muslim communities etc.) working together with the media? Are there any explicit media and public relations strategies?
2. How are the media working together with religious organizations? Are there any specific routines and strategies concerning the thematisation of religions in the media?
3. How are the various religions presented in mass media?

The first two research questions are focusing on the relationship between the two key actors (representatives of religious organizations and journalists). Qualitative interviews were run with both groups in order to get insight into the specific views and perspectives on this relationship from both sides. The purpose of the qualitative interviews was to give some background information on the production process of religion(s) as a media issue. The third research question was investigated by means of quantitative content analysis (see below for further information).

#### **3.2 Qualitative interviews with religious organizations: Methodology and results**

We interviewed a total of 21 representatives of different religious organisations that were in charge of media relations. The number of interview partners per religion represented roughly its distribution in the Swiss population. Therefore, the majority of the interview partners were representatives of two large churches (5 Catholics, 6 Protestants) and 3 interview partners were in charge of media relations in Muslim organizations.

The results of these interviews showed that only the two large churches had explicit public relations strategies and also the necessary resources (finances, employees etc.). All other religious organizations lacked the resources for professional public relations. This is also true for the several Muslim communities in Switzerland that are faced with additional challenges: There are several Muslim organizations at the national level that compete with each other. Furthermore, due to the migration background of most Muslims, there is only a very limited number of representatives that are able to give a media interview in one of the national languages without any language problem.

#### **3.3 Qualitative interviews with journalists: Methodology and results**

We interviewed a total of 35 journalists from TV, radio and newspapers. These journalists were working in the largest media that were also analyzed in the content analysis and were producing media outlets (news emissions, newspaper articles) on the religious issues at least from time to time.

The results can be summarized as follows: Religion is not treated in a different, specialized way, but is just one media issue among others. The journalists agreed that religion is not treated intensively in the media but rather a neglected issue. One reason for this neglect of religion in the media is the fact that most religious “events” (e.g. ceremonies) have little news values (e.g. conflict, surprise, prominence, etc.). Another reason is the lack of knowledge and specialization of journalists with regard to one or several religions (Dahinden/Wyss 2009).

### 3.4 Media content analysis: Methodology and results

The third research question was investigated by means of a media content analysis. The sampling included 11 news media (1 TV station, 2 radios and 8 newspapers) and their coverage of religious issues during one year (December 2007-November 2008). In a first step, a total of 3742 media outlets (e.g. newspaper articles) were analyzed that had at least one religious word. If the media outlet was addressing the issue of religion explicitly and at least as a minor topic (30% of the article or one main religious actor) it was included in a more detailed analysis. Further information about the methodology can be found in a separate publication (Koch 2009).

We were relying on two related, but different theoretical backgrounds: Framing and narration. Frames are “interpretative packages” (Gamson/Modigliani 1989) that provide information on the evaluation of a media issue (Entman 1993). There are several typologies of media frames (Dahinden 2006). We considered the approach by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) as most useful for this study. These authors distinguish five general frames: economics, moral, conflict, public responsibility and personalization.

Frames and narratives (“stories”) are relatively similar theoretical concepts, but narratives differ from frames by adding a temporal structure and archetypical roles to an abstract issue. For the purpose of this study, we chose the six narrative archetypes by Lule (2001, see table 1). Two of these archetypes have a clearly negative connotation: The “guilty one” that produces harm by mistake and the “villain” who is intentionally destructive. The other four archetypes have mainly positive connotations: The hero, the “trickster” (comparable to rebels like Robin Hood), the “good mother” and the “victim”.

Religions	Narrative archetypes					
	guilty one	hero	villain	trickster	good mother	victim
Christianity (N=180)	8.9	7.8	3.3	5.6	19.4	7.2
Catholicism (N=519)	8.1	14.1	6.7	3.3	25.2	9.6
Protestantism (N=129)	3.9	4.7	3.1	3.1	16.3	2.3
Islam (N=245)	14.7	13.9	19.6	3.7	14.3	6.5
Shiite (N=31)	9.7	19.4	32.3	0.0	3.2	12.9
Buddhism (N=92)	4.3	30.4	0.0	14.1	33.7	9.8
Judaism (N=96)	2.1	8.3	3.1	4.2	10.4	29.2
Sect (N=71)	21.1	8.5	21.1	4.2	7.0	12.7

Table 1: Religions and their narrative archetypes (in %, 100%= total of media outlets of one religion)

The findings in table 1 show that the religions are presented in very different archetypes. The categorization of the religions in this table follows the naming in the media, that allows to differentiate between religions on the highest level of abstraction (e.g. Islam) and the related subgroups (e.g. Shiites).

In comparison with the other religions, Christianity and its sub-organizations (catholics, protestants) are presented most often in the positive archetypes of a “good mother”. This is also true for Buddhism, but complemented with additional positive archetypes (“hero, trickster”). For Judaism, the archetype of the “victim” remains a key archetype in the media.

In contrast to these positive images, Islam and its subgroups are more often presented as negative archetypes (“guilty one, villain”) which is comparable to the presentation of the heterogeneous group of “sects”. One explanation for this negative representation of Islam is the focus on foreign news, say on Islam abroad and the relative neglect of domestic Islam in Switzerland.

The analysis of the frames was complementing the findings on narrative archetypes with additional insights: We found that the dominant frames (according the typology of Semetko/Valkenburg 2000) were moral, conflict and personalization. Rather surprisingly, a religious frame in a narrower sense was very seldom. This last point was also confirmed in a detailed analysis on several dimensions of religions: Only Christianity and its subgroups were presented predominantly as religions. The other religions and especially Islam was rather presented as a political group, without any further information about the ideological, ritual or subjective dimension of this religion.

#### 4 Conclusions and recommendations

Though the two research projects differ to some extent with regard to their theoretical background and methodological approach, they found very similar results that show also a high agreement with other empirical studies in that field:

- First, Islam receives a relatively high media attention. In comparison to the number of Muslims in Switzerland, Islam is over-represented in the media.
- Second, the media focus is not on Islam in Switzerland, but on Islam abroad.
- Third, Islam remains primarily a confrontation with the "Other" or the "Foreigner". Therefore, reporting on Islamic issues usually focuses on problems, controversy and often also on politics.
- Fourth, the journalistic reports (television journalism and news journalism in the print media) on Islam are characterized by negativism. Islam and its subgroups are more often presented as negative archetypes (“guilty one, villain”) than other religions. Fifth, the media under review rarely show an in-depth exploration of Islam, despite the multifaceted nature of this religion. An in-depth information on the religious dimensions of Islam is largely missing in the media reports.
- Sixth, Muslim actors are rarely actors from civil society, but mainly religious and political actors who are presented in a mostly passive role. Thus, as is the case in reporting on ethnic minorities, television reports tend to be about Muslims, that is to say that Muslims are rarely allowed to speak for themselves. This fact is not exactly conducive to their social integration.
- Seventh (and a possible explanation of the points above): The interviews with the Muslim representatives showed a lack of resources and organisational infrastructure for media relations. And

the interviews with the journalists showed that religion is not treated intensively in the media but rather a neglected issue.

### Recommendations

Helpful for the formulation of recommendations of action are the findings of an expert workshop in September 2009 in which results of the *Religion(s) on Television* project were presented and discussed by experts and representatives of the media, religions and government authorities. During this workshop, the respective expectations of religious communities and the media were voiced: the media representatives indicated that they expected the religious communities to give media professionals easier access to their daily religious life. They also suggested that religious representatives could be more active in seeking out the public (through the media). The representatives of the religious communities, for their part, called on media professionals to approach the religions not only with prevalent prejudices but, rather, to report about religions in a multifaceted and balanced way. There was a heated debate about the question of how much previous knowledge journalists should bring to their reporting about religions.

Without wanting to make any normative demands on media or religious representatives, the following additional recommendations could possibly bring about change to the current (re)presentation of Islam in Swiss media.

- Efforts are needed from both sides (religion and media) in order to strengthen and improve the representation of Islam in Swiss media. A key area of action is training an education of the (semi-)professionals on both sides.
- Representatives of Muslim organizations need at least a minimum training for their public and media relations.
- Journalists need some education on basic and also specialized knowledge about Islam and other religions (including Christianity). In addition, they need a quick and simple access to representatives of Muslim organizations that can be provided by a respective address list.
- The media coverage on Islam follows mechanisms, that are similar to those found in reporting about immigrants and resulting in routine negativism. These mechanisms are not caused by explicit anti-muslim strategies or xenophobic intentions, but rather by unconscious routine behaviour. Overcoming these routines requires conscious learning efforts and more reflexivity from the media.
- Reporting about Islam could be given another dimension if Islam were no longer presented just as an exotic and political conflict issue and if events and themes in the Muslim world displayed other news factors to a greater extent than is currently the case. More attention should be given to news factors such as cultural proximity, personalization and predictability (routine coverage of religious rituals) that might help to shed a different light on Islam in the media.
- The suggested changes in the selection of news factors should result in a different media representation with a stronger emphasis on the daily life of (Swiss) Islam, which is currently only a marginal theme.
- On that background we recommend that Muslim organizations and individuals should be motivated and encouraged to present themselves and their culture (values, positions on contested issue, lifestyle etc.) in the media. Rather than being a passive object of the media, Muslims

should actively develop their media relations in order to have a say on their media representation.

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