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### Religion in the News on an Ordinary Day: Methodology, Choices, and Bias

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# Religion in the News on an Ordinary Day: Methodology, Choices, and Bias<sup>1</sup>

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## *Abstract*

In this article we explore the Religion on an Ordinary Day (RoD) methodology in detail. The RoD project collected news stories published on September 17 over the period of three years (2013, 2014, 2015) in Australia, Canada, Finland, and the United Kingdom. We consider our decisions regarding the variability of language, researcher bias, and intercoder reliability in data collection and coding and the implications of those decisions. We offer a case study that analyzes references to New Religious Movements in the news. We considered the intentional choices, unintentional choices in the forms of accidents and misunderstandings, as well as unconsidered choices that may reveal the biases and assumptions of the coders. The article concludes by making several recommendations to address these challenges in future studies.

## *Keywords*

Methodology, Coding, Bias, New Religious Movements

## *Introduction*

In this article, we explore the methodology used in the “Religion on an Ordinary Day Project” to collect news data from the United Kingdom, Australia, Finland, and English and French Canada. Although each of the articles in this Special

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Issue will address methodology briefly, here we explore in greater detail our rationale for this methodology, and the ways we adapted it to collect multilingual and regional data. We consider some of the limitations of this approach to indexing/coding the data. We illustrate some of these challenges with a case study on New Religious Movements (NRM) drawn from our data. We discuss how the choices we make in data collection and analysis may obscure the very data we seek to collect. We finally offer some suggestions how to address the problems we identified. The code book used in the “Religion on an Ordinary Day Project” follows as an appendix. This article addresses the growing expectation in the social sciences for greater transparency in data collection and research methodology and offers a structure for other kinds of comparative research in both traditional and new media.

### *The Literature*

In a media study such as this there are both methodological and conceptual challenges that must be anticipated and addressed. These are: the framing of religious themes in the news media, the development of controlled vocabularies, and the potential for intercoder bias. The literature below addresses these challenges.

### **Coding for Religion**

Foundational to the “Religion on an Ordinary Day” project is a series of studies conducted in the United Kingdom. Researchers at the University of Leeds began exploring issues in religion reporting as early as the 1982-1983 with an 18-month study of “Media Portrayals of Religion and their Reception” under the direction of Robert Towler that comprised a quantitative and qualitative content analysis of newspaper reporting of religion in five papers over a two-month period, and television recorded over a seven-day period (Knott, 1985; Knott, 1984a; Knott, 1984b). An event analysis of the media coverage of the 1982 Papal visit was also conducted. Longitudinal studies conducted in 2008-2010 by Knott, Poole and Taira have built on this earlier research exploring the questions of the perceived marginalization of Christianity as well as the rise of Islamophobia and atheism in the mass media (Knott, Poole and Taira, 2013a; Knott, Poole and Taira, 2013b) and the portrayal of specific religious groups. The coding schema used in our current project was adapted from the U.K. study in collaboration with Knott, Poole, and Taira (Appendix 1, Knott, Poole and Taira, 2013b). Our intent was that by using a similar structure we can improve the exchange and reuse of data. Our modified schema is attached as an Appendix to this article.

The U.K. studies arrived at several important observations and conclusions. First was the awareness of the role of media in shaping the public understanding of religion: “At a time when the number of people who participate regularly in religious practices and have access to religious knowledge is declining, the media’s role as an information provider, even educator, is potentially important”

(Knott, Poole and Taira, 2013b, p. 174). Yet, the information shared through media is shaped by the political and ideological positions of the media outlets. Media outlets then, by their editorial decisions, increasingly shape the public perceptions of religion “as we know it” (Knott, Poole and Taira, 2013b, p. 175). The researchers identified differences in reporting, both based on whether the news source focused more on international or domestic coverage, and the explicit positions of the papers. In our study we were interested in the ways that news media outlets’ political and ideological positions might shape reporting, and whether those patterns would also be apparent in our national media.

The U.K. researchers also found, not surprisingly, that Christianity was presented as normative in Britain (Knott, Poole and Taira, 2013b, p. 177), but often as part of a cherished and protected cultural identity. Christianity, as a faith practice, however, was portrayed as in decline and part of the personal rather than public sphere. They found that references to Islam in the news media had grown nearly 10-fold since 1982 (Knott, Poole and Taira, 2013b, p. 79-80), and was second only to Christianity, but greater than references to Roman Catholicism or Protestantism. Islam was often portrayed in the news media as, “bad’ religion, through its continued association with violence, conflict, extremism, terrorism, and a failure to integrate...” (Knott, Poole and Taira, 2013b, p. 177).

Poole in *Reporting Islam* specifically explored the perception that Muslims, post 9/11, were demonized by the press (Poole, 2002). She found that although Islam was still portrayed as something foreign and outside, the coverage was not homogeneous and often reflected the values of the individual newspapers. She did find parallels between the portrayals of Muslim in the news media and public perceptions and pointed out persistent ideas that reappeared in British media coverage creating an image of Islam as an “alien culture”, “resistant to progress,” with allegiances elsewhere (Poole, 2002, p. 250).

Knott, Poole & Taira found that other minority religions, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sikhism, were often seen in the media in relation to political and economic concerns, again often related to issues of violence, integration, and national identity (Knott, Poole and Taira, 2013b, p. 177). They found that, like Islam, reporting of minority religions often emphasized conflict in international news and cultural values and multiculturalism in domestic news (Knott, Poole and Taira, 2013b, p. 92-93). The researchers found there was little recognition of the internal diversity within these communities (Knott, Poole and Taira, 2013b, p. 90), and coverage was limited “unless it resonated strongly with these news values” (Knott, Poole and Taira, 2013b, p. 93). Many references to religions such as Judaism were in obituaries or in event announcements in the case of Buddhism (Knott, Poole and Taira, 2013b, p. 43). Following Towler’s earlier work (1974), new religious movements in the later U.K. studies were coded as part of “Conventional Religion” (Knott, Poole and Taira, 2013b, p. 10). More than half of these references were to Yoga, with occasional references to other groups such as Scientology and Krishna Consciousness (Knott, Poole and Taira, 2013b, p.

43.)

In each of the countries in this study, Christianity is the majority religion, and we anticipated it would dominate media coverage. We also anticipated significant coverage of Islam and the association with themes of violence. Following the U.K. observations, we expected that the coverage of other minority religions would be limited, and that there would be a lack of media awareness of the differences and diversity within these religions. Our coding schema allowed for more precise recording of differing religious expressions through the addition of text generated keywords, such as Burqa, Niqab, or Turban to the main subject headings.

### **Controlled Vocabularies**

Although we speak about coding the news stories for quantitative analysis, at this stage we are primarily indexing to facilitate retrieval of these records from our database. In indexing the indexer reads the document to determine its content and then applies pre-determined categories (names, places, subjects) in order to facilitate retrieval. The headings are selected from a list of predetermined terms called a controlled vocabulary. Synonyms are addressed by using cross-references, and entries are arranged in some order, alphabetical, numerical, or by classification. Researchers who eventually download the records of interest will be engaged in the task of coding for textual analysis (Indexing, 2013).

While most indexing today is automated (e.g., web searching) we employed a method of manual indexing. It has been said that “machine indexing is rotten and human indexing is capricious” (Bloomfield, 2002, p. 64). De Keyser (2012, p. 40-48) offers several arguments against manual indexing: it is slow because indexers must take the time to scan each document, and consequently it is expensive in terms of labour costs. To save time it may not always be detailed enough, although conversely applying too many subject headings can be counter-productive for the searcher. Advantages to manual indexing are that it provides a coherent overview of indexing terms, it can address the problems of synonyms and variants, it takes the context into account, it can account for orthography (e.g., “9/11”), and it can handle a greater complexity of terms (p. 51-57). Working with complex social concepts in a multilingual environment makes automated indexing untenable.

Collaboration on a multilingual and multinational study does necessitate having a common language in the construction of our data sets. To achieve this, our codebook uses a controlled vocabulary. A controlled vocabulary allows us to “insert an interpretive layer of semantics between the term entered by the user and the underlying database to better represent the original intention of the terms of the user” (Leise, Fast, and Steckel, 2002). This contrasts with natural language where the user enters a query as they would normally speak or write. Natural language, by its nature, has a measure of ambiguity in it; Zeng uses the

example of the term “mercury”: planet, metal, automobile, mythical being. As well as terms with multiple meanings, different terms to describe the same concept: salinity or saltiness (2005, 1.1). As researchers we might use the designation, “new religious movement,” while the news media may refer to “new religions”, “cults”, or “sects.”

It has been argued that with the development of advanced search technologies, controlled vocabularies are no longer needed. However, studies have found that simple keyword searches without the aid of a Controlled Vocabulary in the form of subject headings overlooked one-quarter to two thirds of records (Gross, Taylor, and Joudrey, 2015). Controlled vocabularies serve five purposes: to translate natural language, to provide consistency, to indicate relationships between terms, to create hierarchies for browsing, and to aid in retrieval (Zeng, 2005, 1.3). Controlled Vocabularies work best when the terms used are mutually agreed upon. In our study, we spent considerable time discussing our controlled vocabulary with the developers of the original U.K. coding schema to understand how they applied their terminology. The next step was to discuss among ourselves, moving forward, how we would understand and use these terms.

### **Intercoder Bias and Reliability**

One of the limitations of manual indexing we noted above was that it is time consuming. Additionally, several of the five research teams made use of research assistants during the process. Although the research team members stayed with the project for all years, research assistants might change from year to year. This raised concerns about intercoder reliability and agreement.

Campbell et al (2013) have identified three types of intercoder reliability that are relevant to this study: stability, accuracy, and reproducibility (p. 295). Stability relates to changes that might occur in the use of codes over time, which may be an issue in our context where coding/indexing occurred over a three-year period. Accuracy relates to the quality of the coding schema being used. In our case we are adapting a coding schema that has been successfully used in a number of studies over many years. Reproducibility is concerned with whether different coders would code the data the same way. The coder’s experience with the subject matter will impact the coding/indexing decisions that are made, particularly in respect to more ambiguous topics. Campbell et al also raised a distinction between intercoder reliability and intercoder agreement that is relevant for our study: “Intercoder reliability requires that two or more equally capable coders operating in isolation from each other select the same code for the same unit of text”, whereas intercoder agreement “requires that the two or more coders are able to reconcile through discussion whatever coding discrepancies they have for the same unit of text... (p. 297).

In this project research assistants indexing news items were supervised by team members who reviewed their coding. Additionally, when articles were added to

the database these were reviewed by the collection administrator to ensure codes were not missing and incomplete. On a few occasions problems in coding were identified and referred to coders or fixed by the collection administrator. However, centralized changes were done sparingly as the assumption was made that local teams had reviewed the coding. The use of the same modified coding schema by all coders strengthened coding accuracy. Annual face-to-face meetings provided the opportunity to address issues arising from the coding that resulted in agreements on data gathering and coding issues. Research teams also had access to the coded news items from all teams through the collection archive. This allowed teams to review previously coded items.

### *Data Collection*

The “Religion on an Ordinary Day” project began in 2013 as an international and collaborative news media study. It was inspired by day-in-the-life photojournalism projects where photographs capture one day in time. The “Religion on an Ordinary Day” projects collects data on the reporting of religion in local, regional, and national newspapers from four countries: Australia, The United Kingdom, Finland, and English and French Canada. Researchers collected 28 print newspapers on only one day each year, September 17. Since layout, placement, and arrangement were also considered important elements, print versions of the papers were collected even though all the papers had an online version and were often consulted. The date was chosen as it was least impacted by religious observances and holidays, and therefore was deemed as being as religiously neutral as possible. Our collection includes newspaper items from 2013, 2014, and 2015.

Each national team consisted of researchers who gathered the relevant newspapers and identified from the papers all explicit and implicit references to religion and the supernatural. Coders would then assign descriptors and subject codes to the items identified and record this information on data worksheets supplied by the project coordinators in Canada. Although the principal researchers in most cases have remained the same, researcher assistants providing support for coding have changed over time. The newspapers in hardcopy were sent to the project coordinators with the completed spreadsheet. Items were identified, scanned, and stored in a digital repository. In the final year of the project, digital editions preserving the print format were acquired. Metadata was added to the records using the information provided by the national researchers on the spreadsheets.

For each jurisdiction we collected at least one national paper, one regional paper, and one free paper. For convenience, the regional and free papers were selected from the city of the research teams since they would need to obtain print copies for scanning. The *Metro* was the most common free paper in our jurisdictions at that time, so it was chosen as the free paper where available. Some teams choose to collect additional papers. The Canadian team, for example, chose to

collect additional newspapers to broaden the regional and language coverage. They selected papers where the team members were located: Ottawa, Montreal, and Halifax as well as two western Canadian papers. For the English Canada article in this Special Issue, the team chose to use the Ottawa English papers as representative, along with the most widely distributed national paper. For the French Canada article, a local and a regional paper were chosen. There is not a national French language paper, so the team selected a French daily published in Ottawa. The papers collected are listed in the appendix.

Data were gathered about the newspapers such as title and provenance, as well as the individual stories such as location in the paper (number and section), genre (news, advertisement, editorial, etc.), type of news (domestic, international, or mixed), item title, and whether religion was the main issue or passing reference. Each news item was then coded using a coding schema adapted from a longitudinal U.K. study on religion and the media. The papers were sent to the project team in Nova Scotia who scanned the identified news items and added them to the repository with appropriate metadata. The challenge of such a collaborative project is that there are many coders, and several levels of data handling.

This is a multilevel coding schema. The upper-level categories are “Conventional Religion”, “Common Religion”, and “Secular Sacred”. “Conventional Religion” codes represent traditional religious groups. There are fourteen subcategories such as Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam, and Buddhism. There is a subcategory: “Conventional Religion – New Religious Movements.” There are two additional subcategories: “Conventional Religion – Other World Religions” and “Conventional Religion – Other.” “Other World Religions” includes groups such as “Voodoo”, “Jainism”, and “Baha’i.” “Conventional Religion – Other” is intended as a catchall for religious groups that fit no other category. The codebook allows for the recording of coder judgments such as coding “Kabbalah” to Judaism.

The second upper-level subject category is “Common Religion” – non-institutional religion and spiritual beliefs and practices. There are twenty-one subcategories that include concepts such as “magic”, “ghosts”, and “fate.” The third upper-level category “Secular Sacred” includes concepts such as “atheism” and “religion and science.” References to religious-like behaviours from sports or activism would also be included here.

### *New Religious Movements*

It was intended that as this collection would serve two purposes. First it offered a comparative snapshot of religion in the media. As noted above, in each of the countries Christianity was the dominant religion, and historically was the focus of much of the media coverage. However, researchers were curious to see in what ways that dominance was being challenged in the media, and how the coverage



of other religions and spiritualities was changing. It was also intended that, as the collection grew, it would serve as a resource for scholars studying aspects of religion. For instance, the indexing structure allows researchers to explore media portrayals of Roman Catholicism in Canada and Australia. When the conference on *New Religious Movements, Minorities, and Media* (University of Montreal, 2016) was proposed, we attempted to use our carefully curated collection to explore New Religious Movement reporting. What we discovered is the focus of this case study.

New Religious Movements (NRM) are religious groups formed more recently and that exist outside of the dominant global religions. In popular media they might be referred to as “cults” or “sects”. NRM are formed in response to diverse religious and social issues which they seek to address. They will draw upon the religious tradition they emerge from or other traditions around them. Not surprisingly then they appear in a wide variety of forms. How then does one develop criteria by which these groups can be identified for the purpose of study?

There have been many early scholarly attempts to develop descriptive categories. Dawson (2006, pp 28-29) has suggested that the term can be applied to a wide range of voluntary religious groups that often share similar characteristics: 1) they are centred on a charismatic inspirational founder or leader, 2) they claim of esoteric knowledge available to the members, 3) they are loosely organized, and 4) they offer a better way to salvation than organized religions. There have also been attempts to create a typology of NRM such as movements that are world-affirming (e.g. Transcendental Meditation, Scientology), world-rejecting (e.g. The Children of God, The Unification Church), or world-accommodating (e.g. Neo-Pentecostalism, Pak Subuh Muslim Mysticism) (Wallis, 2003, p. 36-56). Another approach has been to classify these groups by philosophical “family” groups such as Charismatic-Pentecostal, New Age, Ancient Wisdom, Eastern, etc. (Dawson, 2003, p. 33). More recent studies have sought to demonstrate that NRM are simply new religions and that most established religions demonstrated similar characteristics and processes in their early years (Hammer and Rothstein, 2012). They are characterized as “first generation movements” and this shapes their other characteristics (Bromley, 2012, p. 14). Many contemporary western NRM have generated significant controversy, in part because of their competition with established religions, as well as concerns about recruitment tactics, fund-raising and uses, and perceived risks to children that are part of the NRM communities (Richardson, 2012, pp. 44-45).

For this study, we attempted to apply the category broadly, but this has implications as we discuss below. We examined data gathered in each of the three years of the media study (2013, 2014, and 2015) and across all the project jurisdictions. Our goal was to identify instances in our coding where references to minority religions and NRM may have been obscured, to explore the coding

choices we made that led to these results, and to reflect on how we could better address these kinds of methodological issues moving forward.

When we undertake any research project, we intend that our analyses will reveal and make plain. We plan to treat all our research subjects with equal care and fairness, and to allow their stories to be heard. In a media study we have two groups that we scrutinize: the subjects of the news reports, and the news media that mediate and shape their stories. As we discuss later in this chapter, we are very mindful of the ways that the news media frame religious issues. We are also aware that as media observers our own biases and preconceptions can influence our analyses. Yet even with our best intentions, and our critical awareness, our coding decisions may still distort our results.

## *Analysis*

### **Quantitative Analysis**

Below is an example of metadata fields used for each article in the online repository. Note that “dc.subject: The Turnbull era” is an example of descriptive subject heading added by the coders with particular meaning in their national context. The other subject descriptors applied came from the shared codebook. The metadata applied to each article allowed for subject filtering. There was no limit on the number of subject descriptors that could be applied to a news item.

dc.contributor.author	The Australian
dc.coverage.spatial	Australia
dc.date.accessioned	2016-12-13T13:40:05Z
dc.date.available	2016-12-13T13:40:05Z
dc.date.issued	2015
dc.date.issued	2015-09-17
dc.identifier.uri	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10222/72573">http://hdl.handle.net/10222/72573</a>
dc.publisher	The Australian
dc.subject	The Turnbull era
dc.subject	National Paper
dc.subject	Passing Reference
dc.subject	c. Secular Sacred - Humanism
dc.subject	International
dc.subject	News
dc.title	Migrants risk land-mined route
dc.identifier.startpage	9

This analysis of NRM codes was undertaken during the third year of data collection. At that time there were 1,088 records in the database spanning three years, three continents, and written in three languages. In addition to the descriptive metadata applied to these records, we applied over 3000 subject codes. An additional 317 records were added to the collection after this analysis, completing the third year of data collection.

These included subject codes indicated the locus of the news report such as domestic (n=496), international (n=170), or mixed (n=126). We also coded for genre of the item such as news (n=511), opinion (n=61), obituary (n=34), or advertisement (n=75). Most references to religion in these news items were found to be passing references (67%, n=703) in a story focused on another issue. An example might be a sports story where there was a reference to a “lucky” throw or “needing a miracle” to win. In one third of these news items (33%, n=354) religion was the main issue.

There were 540 codes to “Conventional Religion”, 386 codes to “Common Religion”, and 254 codes to “Secular Sacred”. The most coded “Conventional Religion” category was “Religion General” (n=173), and the most referenced groups were Christianity (n=128; Roman Catholicism n=73, Protestant n=55) and Islam (n=148).

The references to Roman Catholicism ranged widely from the benign: a Finnish history quiz or a French crossword puzzle, to the satirical: “Pope Joan” restaurant, to the positive such as the Catholic aid agencies welcoming refugees and personal stories of faith in the face of adversity. There were also controversial stories such as Catholic Bishops in Cuba calling for political reform. Others involved scandals such sexual abuse and coverups, or the church’s resistance on issues like euthanasia, women’s rights, or dress codes.

The stories coded to “Conventional Religion – Islam” were predominately negative, frequently concerning the war against ISIS. There were notable exceptions such as a story about an exhibition of Islamic Art or Cat Stevens, a Muslim convert, coming to play in Toronto. Local stories addressed issues like opposition to face coverings or community mosques, although did on occasion challenge Islamophobia. These kinds of news stories tend to dominate the religion reporting and crowd out references to other religious groups.

When we considered the subject category, “Conventional Religion – New Religious Movements”, we found only four news items with this code. This represents only 0.4% of all items in the collection, and 0.7% of “Conventional Religion” items.

### **Qualitative Analysis**

The four records coded as “New Religious Movements” were:

“Appropriate facial expressions for the six levels of terror alert” Australia, 2014, Cartoon, Main Issue, “Full Evil Death Cult”, “Double Strength Hideous Pure Evil Death Cult” (*The Age*, September 17, 2014, p. 17).

“What’s Happening: Events”, Canada, 2015, Arts and Life, Passing Reference, Taoist Tai Chi (*The Chronicle Herald*, September 17, 2015, D4 and D5).

“Nespresso Cubania capsules”, Australia, 2014, Passing Reference, Review, “Growing Pod Cult” (*MX*, September 17, 2014, p. 18).

“Pleasures”, United Kingdom, 2013, News In Brief, Passing Reference, “Transcendental Meditation” (*Metro* (UK), September 17, 2013, p. 27).

When we examined the stories in greater detail, we found that two of the stories are included because they used the phrase “cult”, a term mapped to our “Use For” (UF) code “Conventional Religion – New Religious Movements.” The first use occurred in a political cartoon and uses the phrases: “full evil death cult” and “double strength hideous pure evil death cult” as adjectives to comically describe extreme levels of terror. The use of these phrases was intended to invoke the strong negative connotations associated with the idea of “cult.” The phrases here however did not refer to any identifiable religious group.

The next item was from a community news page listing sporting, entertainment, educational, and community events. The coded item was an invitation to a Taoist Tai Chi class. Although this was a reference to a specific religious group, this was a miscoding as “Taoism.” The agreed UF code should have been: “Conventional Religion – Other World Religions.” Whether this was an accidental coding, or a differing understanding of Taoist Tai Chi was unclear.

The third item was a review of a popular coffee machine. The author was referencing the religion-like commitment people had for their individualized coffee makers. The author used the terms “growing ‘pod’ cult” and “my cult leader” to make fun of the coffee devotees and their commitment to this practice and then to self-identify as a devotee. There was no reference to an identifiable religious group, but rather invokes the fanaticism associated with “cult” groups.

The fourth item was from a celebrity news page. The focus of the clip was an exchange between celebrities on staying “hot” despite their lifestyles. There was a final comment that one celebrity uses “transcendental meditation” to de-stress. It was a passing reference to the practice without details on whether this was pursued as a religious practice. This appeared to be the only reference to an identifiable religious group or movement.

## *Findings and Discussion*

### **Codes Reveal and Codes Conceal**

It was apparent from our sampling that NRM received little attention in print news media, and references to “cults” drew on stereotypes of danger and fanaticism. This resonated with the conclusions of the U.K. studies that found coverage of minority religions was minimal, and most often associated with conflict. A closer examination of the data, however, uncovered additional possible references.

In the creation of our codebook, the collaborating researchers gathered on multiple occasions to agree on categories and descriptors. To aid in the application of the code terms we also added subject descriptors or UF terms. When I encountered the terms: Vatican, Pope, or Papal, I was directed to use the code term: “Roman Catholicism.” Coders were encouraged to add to the codebook UF decisions that have made in their coding process so that future coders can understand the choices made. We also made choices about the codes we applied: intentional choices, unintentional choices, and unconsidered choices that can reveal and conceal news about new religious movements.

### ***Intentional Choices***

The first type of coding issue was the intentional coding choices we made. There were two kinds of intentional choices. The first example was the decision we made to code some references: “Conventional Religion – Other World Religions” and others: “Conventional Religion – New Religious Movements.” This is a question of term scope; what are the criteria by which we decide a “religious movement” is a “world religion?” For example, we chose in our codebook to code “Baha’i” as an “Other World Religion” even though it is still listed in many indexes of NRM (Clark, 2015). Baha’i, has over 170 years of history, has an estimated five million members and considers itself a world religion (Chryssides, 2000). Is it still a NRM?

The second example of an intentional choice was to code some news items: “Common Religion – New Age.” “Common Religion” are categories associated with spiritualities and folk religion rather than organized religion. This category may conceal beliefs and practices related to NRM. In our collection there are four news items coded to this category:

“Casan ystävät ry:n luento” – Common Religion - New Age, Finland, 2014, Main Issue, Domestic, Advertisement (*Metro* (Finland), September 17, 2014).

“Dreaming of Good Sleep” – Common Religion – New Age, Canada, 2013, Feature, Yoga, Meditation (*The Vancouver Sun*, September 17, 2013, p. D3).

“Looking at People will soon be replaced by iContact”, Canada, 2013, Google Glasses, Future (*Calgary Herald*, September 17, 2013, p. A14).

“Shoots, sprouts and leaves”, Canada, 2013, Feature, Healthy Eating, Hippies (*Metro* (Halifax), September 17, 2013, p. 21).

The first item was an invitation to a public lecture on finding inner peace and harmony to improve personal health. The group offering the lecture is not named, and the claims might be attributed to many religious or spiritualist groups. The second item addressed issues of insomnia. There were passing references to the uses of Yoga and Meditation to relieve stress and improve sleep. These practices were not presented as religious, and the connotation was positive. The third item was an opinion piece on the impact of new technologies on interpersonal relationships. It framed the discussion as a clash of cultures, and the new technologies were described in negative terms. The author argued for preserving personal contact and relationships and this was interpreted as “New Age” thinking. The fourth item in this category was a feature article on diet and healthy living. The author described how formerly people who were concerned with organic and natural foods were once considered hippies. The food movement has now moved into the mainstream. Although there were no explicit references to new religious movements in this category, it has been identified as place to look for possible discussion of new religious groups, practices, and beliefs.

### ***Unintentional Choices: Accidents and Misunderstandings***

A second type of coding issue was the unintentional choice. Regardless of the care taken in coding new items, mistakes and misunderstandings can occur. The codebook includes the category: “Conventional Religion – Other.” Intended as a catchall for items that could not fit in any other category, the code was applied forty-two times or 4% of all news items and 8% of all stories coded “Conventional Religion.” It was among the “Other” category that we identified the most explicit reference to an NRM: Scientology.

“Online activists have NDP in sights”, Canada, 2013, News, Main Issue.  
Conventional Religion – Other, Scientology, Anti-Scientology Anonymous Group Project Chanology (*The Chronicle Herald*, September 17, 2013, pp. A1 and A3).

The news story described an email scandal during a past Canadian provincial election. The group Anonymous accused a political party of using cyberwarfare as part of their campaign strategy. The group was part of Anonymous’ anti-Scientology wing known as Project Chanology with connections to a competing party staffer. The staffer was a vocal critic of Scientology and had made allegations against Scientology during a previous election. A candidate in that election was a psychologist and researcher, and it was alleged that Scientologists were attacking him online. There appeared to be no evidence to substantiate the allegation. The article made reference to specific Scientology beliefs but cast Scientology in a neutral light. It is significant that the codebook subject descriptions direct “Scientology” to be coded: “Conventional Religion – New Religious Movements” but it was inadvertently “othered.” We subsequently reread all the “othered” news items to see what else might have landed in this basket.

Another example of an unintentional choice was an article about the chemical attacks by the Assad forces during the Iraq war.

“UN on chemical attack: this is a war crime, the results are overwhelming and indisputable”, Canada, 2013, News, Passing Reference, Secular Sacred – Humanism (*Metro* (Halifax), September 17, 2013, p. 12).

The article quotes the British ambassador to the U.N. who states that the rockets examined carried a payload, “35 times the amount in the used in the 1995 Tokyo subway attack.” The reference is to the Aum Shinrikyo group, an apocalyptic NRM that was responsible for the sarin gas attack that killed 13 and injured more than 6200 people. Since the group was not named in the article, only a coder with familiarity with NRM might recognize the reference. The article was coded as Secular Sacred – Humanism because of its references to “crimes against humanity.” The Iraq war was considered a secular conflict by the coding team, although the quote draws a parallel between the actions of Aum Shinrikyo and the Assad regime.

### ***Unconsidered Choices (ISIS/Islam)***

The final type of coding issue was the unconsidered choices that reflect our own ideological positions as researchers, and perhaps our own western biases.

“Top guns blitz evil death cult”, Australia, 2014, News, Main issue, Conventional Religion – Islam (*The Herald Sun*, September 17, 2014, p. 7).

The news article from an Australian paper considered the advance of ISIS in Iraq, nicknaming the group: “Evil Death Cult.” The Australian government of Tony Abbot, beginning in August-September 2014, frequently used this expression in an attempt both to demonize and at the same time distinguish ISIS from mainstream Islam (Lentini, 2015, p. 237-252). It was a news military affairs commentator Ralph Peters who explained, “Islam, like all the religions has some really ugly spots in its history,” but unlike mainstream Islam, ISIL was “a new apocalyptic death cult that’s burst out of Islam” (Lentini, 2015, p. 239). Muslims in the U.S and U.K. have also used the term in various forms in rejection of ISIS’ attempts to portray themselves as the sole authority and true interpretation of Islam (Lentini, 2015, p. 239-249). Commentators and politicians quite intentionally drew on the worst stereotypes of the cult or sect as the “other”, and the use of the term “death cult” focused on specific religious groups who venerated death. Gaub, a security analyst, has argued that ISIS must be dealt with as a “cult” or religious movement rather than a terrorist organization (2016, p. 113-130). Firestone offers a detailed analysis that proposes that jihadist movements like ISIS/ISIL are New Religious Movements (2012, p. 266) based on their loose leadership structure and ideology, and then offers parallels from other recognized movements within and without Islam.

It is notable however, for our purpose, to consider how we have approached these news stories. We previously encountered that term above in a political cartoon: “Full Evil Death Cult”, “Double Strength Hideous Pure Evil Death Cult.” In that cartoon it was not connected to an identifiable group and was a passing reference, but the use of the term “cult” was sufficient to trigger the code “Conventional Religion – New Religious Movement.” In this current instance the news item was coded: “Conventional Religion – Islam.” Every news item relating to ISIS in the collection was also coded: “Conventional Religion – Islam.”

### **How Can we Improve Reliability?**

Except for annual in-person meetings, our collaboration over several years was largely by post and email. Consequently, some of the coders never met in person and this can pose challenges in building common ground even for experienced researchers. Although considerable research has been done on virtual collaboration in business contexts, there is limited academic literature on virtual research teams (VRT). VTR have been defined as “as any form of research collaboration that spans one or more boundaries, including geography, culture, time, organizational affiliation, and/or discipline” (Arora, 2012, p. 2). Our team crossed many of these boundaries. Studies have demonstrated the importance of face-to-face contact, but this can be achieved through the using different types of communication and information and communication technologies (ICT) (Arora, 2012, pp. 3-4). Commitment by leaders to using ICT, as well as team training and experience in using these tools are also success factors for VRT (Hanebuth, 2015, p. 163). Additional success factors for VRT were clear process and standards, team training, team trust, and cultural awareness (p. 164-165). In the 2020-2021 Pandemic context, researchers by necessity have developed new skills and experience in using ICT and online collaboration. These skills will strengthen future VRT and can address many of the challenges we faced in this study. More research needs to be done on the use of virtual research teams.

### **Conclusion**

What can we learn from this reflection on our methodology? There was certainly room to strengthen our practice and improve inter-coder reliability. This can be achieved by implementing tighter controls on data input and by putting in place a system of coding checks. This will enable us to harmonize our practices and to understand the lens through which we each see religion in our own media. A codebook or controlled vocabulary is successful when we share common understandings of the terms we use. This required expanding on the subject descriptors to provide more direction to our coders, and thereby reducing the use of catch-all categories such as “Other.”

We became more aware of the choices we made and how they can reveal and conceal news that is already marginalized in reporting. This required re-reading our categories to find patterns in the material that fall into each. We needed to



establish an appropriate authority to guide our coding of “new religious movements” and other categories. This can take the form of a master list, or preferable guiding principles for decision making.

We can conclude from our case study that New Religious Movements, like most minority religions in the U.K. studies, received little news media attention. The few references to “cult” invoked ideas of extremism or fanaticism. When stories had a more neutral tone, as in the reference to Scientology, they involved political conflict. The earlier U.K. studies observed that news media failed to recognize the internal diversity of minority religions. It is significant that as researchers, we also wrestled with this in respect to Islamist movements.

Creating clear definitions of our categories, such as with “New Religious Movement”, did pose challenges. As we noted above, to create an effective coding structure, it is essential that we share common understanding of our terms. There are many definitions of “new religious movements”, “alternative religions” and “religious innovation.” In “Religion as Claim,” Introvigne (1999) explored the distinctions between popular and institutional definitions of religion, and the assumptions that underlie those attempts at definition. There is also the challenge of deciding whether a group or movement is in fact “new” or simply a derivation on an existing religion (Chryssides, 2000). In the case of our Baha’i reference, when does a New Religious Movement become, simply, a religion? Christianity, now the largest world religion, arguably began as a NRM (Regev, 2016). In this case, one option might be to add to our coding framework a more comprehensive list of NRM, but this makes our codebook increasingly cumbersome. A more fruitful course forward may be the development of criteria that can be used to identify an NRM or other kinds of categories. Applying that set of criteria would help multiple coders address complex references. We are challenged then to explore our unconsidered choices, lest we simply replicate rather than challenge the limitations found in news media reporting.

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APPENDIX  
R.O.D. PROJECT MODIFIED CODEBOOK

<b>Principle Headings</b>	<b>Categories</b>	<b>Fixed Terms</b>	<b>Text Generated Terms</b>
<b>A. NEWS SOURCE</b> (Newspapers used)			
	1. Australia		
		The Australian	
		The Herald	
		The Age	
		MX	
	2. Canada		
		The Globe and Mail	
		La Press	
		The Gazette	
		Metro (Montreal)	
		Le Droit	
		The Ottawa Citizen	
		Metro (Ottawa)	
		The Chronicle Herald	
		Metro (Halifax)	
		Calgary Herald	
		Vancouver Sun	
		Capital Xtra!	
	3. Finland		
		Helsingin Sanomat	
		Turun Sanomat	
		Metro	
	4. United Kingdom		
		The Times	
		Manchester Evening News	
		Metro	
<b>B. LANGUAGE</b>			
	1. Francais		
	2. English		
	3. Finnish		
<b>C. LOCATION</b> (Where News Event Occurred)			
	1. Domestic		
	2. International		
	3. Mixed		
<b>D. GENRE</b>			

	1. Front Page		
	2. News		
	3. Editorial		
	4. Opinion		
	5. News In Brief		
	6. Advertisement		
	7. Letter		
	8. Obituary		
	9. Review	TV, Film, Theatre	
	10. Announcements	Wedding, Graduation	
	11. Images		
<b>E. MAIN SUBJECT CATEGORIES</b>			
	1. Religious Groups (UK- Conventional 1)		
		a. Roman Catholicism	Pope, Papal, Vatican,
		b. Protestantism	Baptist, Adventist, Pentecostal, Anglican, Reformed, Presbyterian, Salvation Army
		c. Councils of Churches	World Council of Churches
		d. Religion General	Religion, Religious, Clergy, Religious Education, Religious Buildings, Sacred, Hallowed
		e. Other Christian Churches and Groups	The Navigators, Interservice Christian Fellowship, Alpha, Catholic Christian Outreach, Canadian Bible Society,
		f. Church History	Protestant Reformation, Vatican II, Archaeology, Crusades,
		g. New Religious Movements	Cults, Sects,
		h. Islam	General, Extremism, Mecca, Mosque, Muslim
		j. Hinduism	General, Tantrism
		k. Buddhism	General, Tibetan Buddhism, Zen
		l. Sikhism	General,
		m. Judaism	General, Zionism, Kabbalah
		n. Other World Religions	Voodoo, Shinto, Bah'ai, Confuciansim, Taosim, Jainism
	2. Religious Faith and Practice (UK - Conventional 2)		
		a. Religious Cosmology	
		b. Religious Practice	
		c. Religious Concepts and Doctrines	
		d. Religious Texts	Bible, Gospel, Old Testament, New Testament, Koran, Book of

			Mormon, Ramayana, Talmud, Tanakh, King James Bible
		e. Modern Religious Issues	Creationism, Intelligent Design,
		f. Religious Media	Television, Radio, Music, DVD, Blog, Twitter, Internet
		g. Academic Study of Religion	University, Experts
		h. Religious Symbols	Burqa, Niqab, Turban, Kirpan, Crucifix
	3. The Supernatural/Spirituality (UK- Common)		
		a. Magic	Magician, Spell, Black magic, Conjuring
		b. Witchcraft	Witches, Curse, Bewitched, Sorcery, Witchdoctors, Witchhunt, Wizards, Evil Eye
		c. Chance	Chance, Odds, Dice
		d. Signs	Signs, Omen, Hunch, Jinx,
		e. Ghosts	Spirits, Ancestors, Poltergeist,
		f. Spiritualism and Spirit Possession	Spiritualism, Spirit Possession, Spirits, Occult, Séance, Ouija Board
		g. Psychic Powers	Psychic, Telepathy, ESP, Paranormal, Sixth Sense, Precognition, Channeling, déjà vu, Hypnotism
		h. Luck	Luck, Bad Luck, Good Luck, Lucky, Fortune, Lucky Number, Lucky Colour
		i. Superstitions	Throwing Salt, Fingers Crossed,
		j. Gambling	Lottery, Dice
		k. Fortune Telling Techniques	
		l. Fate and Destiny	Karma
		m. Other Supernatural Beings	General, Fairies, Vampires, Dracula, Werewolves, Zombies, Undead
		n. The Unexplained	UFO, Aliens, Extraterrestrials
		o. Folk Religion	Druids, Pantheism, Pagan, Paganism, African Traditional Religion, North American Aboriginal Religion
		p. Folk Practices	May Day, Equinox
		q. Mythology	General, Greek and Roman, Arthurian Legends, Dragons, Cannibalism, Unicorns, Egyptians, Loch ness Monster
		r. Gypsies	Roma, Romani
		s. New Age	
	4. Secular (UK - Secular)		

		a. Secularism, religion and secular	General, Secularization, Laicite, Non-religion, Non-religious
		b. Atheism	General
		c. Humanism	General
		d. Religion and Science	Creationism, Intelligent Design
		e. Sacred	Market, Home Ownership, Music, Public Services (Library), Life (assisted suicide), Judgment in Court
		f. Liberalism	
		g. Spirituality	General,
		h. Religion-like	Ecology, Environment (Global warming), Football, Market, Marxism, Individualism, Humanity
		i. Public Sphere - Expressions of Faith	Invocation, Public Prayer, Lord's Prayer,
	5. Law & Government (UK - N/A)		
		a. Government	Legislation, Parliament, Legislature, National Assembly, Council. Election
		b. Law and Justice	Court, Crime, Criminal, Illegal
		c. Opposition	Protest, Arab Spring, Pro-Life, Pro-choice, Lobby
		d. Public Education	School, Home School, Separate School,
	6. Immigration & Accommodation (UK-N/A)		
		a. Cultural Issues	Language, Cross-cultural Communication,
		b. Immigrants and Refugees	Asylum, Refugee, Deportation, Immigrant, Landed, Citizenship
		c. Accommodation	Bouchard-Taylor Commission,
	7. Gender Issues (UK - N/A)		
		a. Sexism	
		b. Gender Equality	Equality, Equity, Employment,
		c. Discrimination (Legal)	Human Rights, Charter, Prohibited Grounds
	8. Terrorism (UK - N/A)		Bomber, Suicide, Attack, Domestic Terrorism

Note: Categories 6-8 were added to the Codebook to allow nation specific coding. These categories were not used through the project.