

Framing Russian Orthodox Church: How Russian State-owned Media Covered the Church/Religion

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Abstract

Media scholars agree that much of what the public knows about news, politics and even religion is obtained through mediated sources. Today the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) is officially separated from the State but is increasingly involving in social, cultural and political life of Russian society not only directly, but also by using media. The paper focuses on media coverage of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in news programs of state-owned media “Perviikanal” and “Rossia” (2014-2015) and examines the interaction of the Russian Orthodox Church and the State through media.

Keywords

Framing, media, religion, politics, Russian Orthodox Church, Moscow Patriarchate, Russian media.

Résumé

Les spécialistes des médias conviennent que beaucoup de ce que le public sait à propos de nouvelles, la politique et même la religion est obtenue grâce à des sources médiation. Aujourd'hui, l'Eglise orthodoxe russe (ROC) est officiellement séparée de l'Etat, mais est de plus en plus impliquer dans la vie sociale, culturelle et politique de la société russe non seulement directement, mais aussi par l'utilisation des médias. Le document met l'accent sur la couverture médiatique de l'Eglise orthodoxe russe (ROC) dans les programmes d'information des médias d'Etat “Perviikanal” et “Rossia” (2014-2015) et examine l'interaction de l'Eglise orthodoxe russe et l'Etat à travers les médias.

Mots-clés

Encadrement, les médias, la religion, la politique, Église orthodoxe russe, Patriarcat de Moscou, les médias russes.

Introduction

The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) alternatively known as the Moscow Patriarchate stands apart from diverse associations, organizations and the rest of civil society actors in modern Russia. It should be noted that Russia is a multinational state with a number of religions. However historically Orthodoxy was essentially the leading religion in Russia. It is considered to be a culture factor which determines and sacralizes Russian national identity. Consequently, the ROC is the significant non-governmental entity of the public sphere with privileged status.

The relationship between the Church and the State has had different stages. The Church and the State were unified as united social system for centuries. One could not be conceived and exist separately from the other. According to the concept of Orthodox autocracy, Tsar's authority was derived directly from God and anointed sovereign of Russian nation represented a unique set of values embodied by Russian Orthodoxy. Monarchical power was sacral and was supported by the Church, thus the Church received from the State basic social guarantees, and acted as a state ideology. The relationship changed after the October Revolution of 1917. Bolsheviki combined their struggle for power and the destruction of the old order into the struggle against the Russian Orthodox Church. Obviously, religion was an ideological opponent of dialectical and historical materialism. Therefore, the Church as an institute of tsarist Russia, which strongly defended monarchical power, had to be destroyed. The next stage of relationship

refers to the post-Soviet period. In that period the ROC attempted to rebuild its formerly dominant role in Russian society. Church officials claimed that the Russian Orthodox Church suffered more than other religions, institutions during the Soviet period, therefore new authorities should demonstrate their penitence towards the Church. In the 1990s, after the years of communist rule, the State assigned back to the Church its formerly owned property - temples, land, historical monuments. The 'restitution' of the property of religious organizations began with President's decree "On the return to the Russian Orthodox Church of buildings and religious literature" in 1991 (El'cin, 1991). In 1993, the decree "On transfer of religious organizations, religious buildings and other property" was issued and charged the Government to prepare a "gradual transfer of ownership or use of religious organizations, religious buildings and adjacent territories and other religious property, located in the federal property, for use in religious, educational, charitable and other statutory purposes related to the activities of religions/confessions" (El'cin, 1993). The last and most significant political step towards the 'restitution' of property of religious organizations was made when the State Duma passed the law "On the transfer of property to religious organizations for religious purposes under state or municipal ownership" in 2010 (Federal'nyj zakon, 2010).

Subsequently in the 2000-s the relationship between secular and clerical authorities were being built more on mutual support and trust which was beneficial to both parties. The State was in need of ideological justification of the policy on historical, cultural and religious basis. The ROC suggested a theologically-informed vision of Russian national identity and exceptionalism. According to this vision Russia appears as a distinct civilization quite different from the Western one, with its own "cultural and moral code", and a peculiar social and political system that privileges the interests of the State over those of the individual. (Torbakov, 2014).

Today the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) is officially separated from the State but is increasingly involving in social, cultural and political life of Russian society. According to the "Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church" (Osnovy, 2000), the ideal model of the relationship between the State and Russian Orthodoxy is the model of the Byzantine

symphony of powers, which is based, on the one hand, on independence, and on the other hand, on close interaction and interpenetration of the secular and clerical authorities. For instance the State allows the Church to establish military clergy institution and set up classes on the basics of Orthodox culture in schools. The State and the Church jointly carry out actions on the fight against drugs, alcoholism, immorality. Patriarch Kirill meets regularly with country's political leaders, conducts presentations on various topics.

All these actions hit in media agenda and receive wide coverage. Producing and transmitting messages about the Church on a daily basis in media are a powerful tool for shaping public opinion, influencing people's thoughts and attitudes. Hence, in order to understand these media interpretations of the ROC, this study investigates the frames used to represent the events with the participation of the Church.

Theoretical background

Framing constitutes one of the most important areas of research in communication, sociology, psychology and political science. Much intellectual effort has been made in recent years explaining from a variety of perspectives what a frame is, what exactly constitutes framing, how framing works (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Cacciatore, Scheufele, & Iyengar, 2015; Chong & Druckman, 2007; Cornelissen & Werner, 2014; D'Angelo & Kuypers, 2010; De Vreese & Lecheler, 2012; Hallahan, 1999; Hamdy & Gomaa, 2012; Lecheler & Vreese, 2012; Reese, Gandy Jr, Grant, & others, 2001; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). For instance, multiple definitions of news frames in both theoretical and empirical literature were suggested (e.g., De Vreese & Lecheler, 2012; Matthes, 2009).

According to Gitlin (1980), frames, "largely unspoken and unacknowledged, organize the world both for journalists who report it and, in some important degree, for us who rely on their reports" (Gitlin, 1980, p.11). Tankard (1991) describes a frame as "a central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration." (Tankard, Hendrickson, Silberman, Bliss & Ghanem, 1991, p.11). To Reese (2001) "frames are organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world." (Reese, 2001, p. 11)

Many competing perspectives on framing and framing processes can be summarized under Entman's (1993) frequently cited definition:

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described (p.52).

Framing effects are "changes in judgment engendered by subtle alterations in the definition of judgment or choice of problems" (Iyengar, 1987, p.816). As Druckman argues, "a framing effect occurs when a communication changes people's attitudes toward an object by changing the relative weights they give to competing considerations about the object" (Druckman, 2001, p.2)

Frames have been conceptualized at various levels of abstractions: e.g. as issue-specific or generic. Issue-specific frames refer to specific topics or news events. Generic frames transcend thematic limitations as they can be identified across different issues, cultural contexts and even time (De Vreese & Lecheler, 2012; De Vreese, 2005; Matthes, 2009)

On the basis of previous studies, Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) found that five frames are systematically used in the news: responsibility, conflict, (economic) consequences, human interest and morality frames (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000, p.95). When an issue is framed according to the responsibility frame it is presented in such a way as the responsibility for its cause or solution is placed on political authorities, individuals or groups (Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000). Articles that demonstrate the conflict frame emphasize conflicts between individuals, groups, or institutions, stress the points of divergence between the opponents for capturing audience's interest (Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000). The (economic) consequences frame reports an event, problem, or issue in terms of the consequences it will have economically on an individual, group, institution, region, or country (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). The human interest frame presents an issue from an emotional point of view; it personalizes a problem. The morality frame presents situations from a religious/moral angle. (Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000).

Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) mark out two approaches to content analyzing frames in the news: inductive and deductive. The inductive approach

assumes open view for revealing the array of possible frames, when the researcher loosely defines preconceptions of these frames. This approach is appropriate for small samples and can detect many possible ways in which an issue can be framed. Labor intensity and difficulties in replication are mentioned among the shortcomings of this method.

A deductive approach involves predefining certain frames as content analytic variables to verify the extent to which these frames occur in the news. This approach makes it necessary to have a clear idea of what kinds of frames are likely to be in the news, because the frames that are not defined a priori may be overlooked. (Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000, pp. 94-95).

Inductive approach to content analyzing frames is more preferable in this study.

Methods

Sample

Data for the current study were collected from news programs of two federal TV channels "Perviikanal" and "Rossia". Both TV channels were selected for several reasons. At first, despite the proliferation of Internet news in recent years, TV solely continues to serve as the main news source for Russians today. Television is the only mass medium that has nationwide reach in the Russian Federation. "Perviikanal" and "Rossia" are the most influential channels with the largest audience in the Russian Federation. Results of public opinion research obtained by "Levada Center", a well-respected independent pollster, in 2014 indicated that the leading position in the ranking of news channels has been taken up by "Perviikanal" and "Rossia" for many years (Obshhestvennoe, 2014, p.125).

Moreover, in contrast to the Church publications, addressed to a narrower audience, news programs create the image of the Church and Orthodoxy in collective consciousness. Secondly, both TV channels represent State's point of view on all covered issues. 100% of "Rossia" and 39% of "Perviikanal" are owned by the State. Remarkably, the rest of the shares are owned by businessmen who have been known for being close to President Vladimir Putin. In sum, McLuhan's (1964) famous statement that "Medium is a message" can be paraphrased into "Medium is State's message" with reference to Russian reality (McLuhan, 1964).

Table 1. Rating of news channels in Russia

Source of information	Aug. 2011	Oct. 2012	March 2014
Pervii kanal	71	71	82
Rossija-1	58	64	71
NTV	48	49	48
Kul'tura	6	9	11
5-j kanal	8	12	19
TVC	5	8	12
Rossija-24	10	15	30
REN-TV	13	18	18
other federal	1	10	6
Dozhd'	1	2	2
RBK	1	3	5
other regional	11	11	13
Euronews	2	3	5
other international	1	2	1
don't watch	4	7	4

N=1600

Do you watch the TV news, and if yes, what the news channels you watch more or less regularly? (Obshhestvennoe, 2014, p.125)

This study analyzes the coverage of the Russian Orthodox Church by “Perviikanal” and “Rossia” during the time period from January 2014 to June 2015. The stories from newscasts were selected by conducting a search in on-line database of Russian press publications “Public.ru” using “ROC”, “Moscow Patriarchate”, “patriarch”, “Orthodoxy” as the keywords to narrow down the search results. The optimal set of keywords was determined by experimenting with alternative word combinations and their locations in text structure. After double-checking every “news item” (story) and cleaning the irrelevant, this process resulted in 633 news items that referred to the Russian Orthodox Church. Among these stories, 312 were from “Perviikanal” and 321 were from “Rossia”.

Coding

The coding unit was news story. This method is more efficient in capturing the content and themes of the overall coverage than using the paragraph as the coding unit. The coding categories included standard variables such as story name, name of the author, and date of release. News stories were examined for use of various frames.

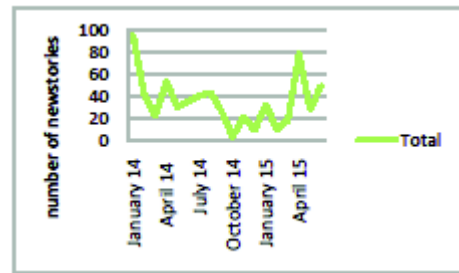


Figure 1. Frequency of ROC appearance in news programs

Results

Among the 633 news items, all are positive or neutral toward the ROC. Any open discussion of religious issues or criticism of church initiatives is lacking. Based on the analysis we can conclude that the dominant strategy used by ROC during the study period was permanent presence on the media scene. Even so the context of events is not significant. Figure 1 lists the frequency of ROC appearance in news programs. The events related to the following themes serve as information occasion (see Table 2):

1) the dates of Orthodox feasts (Pasch (Easter), Palm Sunday (the Sunday before Pascha, Ascension (forty days after Pasch), Pentecost (fifty days after Pasch), The Nativity of the Theotokos (8 September), The Elevation of the Holy Cross (14 September), The Presentation of the Theotokos (21 November), The Nativity of the Lord (25 December), The Theophany (Epiphany) of the Lord (6 January), The Presentation of the Lord (2 February), The Annunciation (25 March), The Transfiguration (6 August), The Dormition (Falling Asleep) of the Theotokos (15 August) and other (37% of all news about the Church);

2) deaths of outstanding people whose funerals the Patriarch attended (Russian writers, politicians, religious leaders) (8% of all news about the Church);

3) opening of new churches, temples after restoration and organizing different religious exhibitions (17% of all news about the Church);

4) the attacks on churches and clergies in Ukraine and events in Ukraine as a whole (23% of all news about the Church);

5) statements of Church's representatives on general social issues such as abortion, homosexuality, Internet dependence, family problems (15% of all news about the Church).

Table 2. Type of Event

Type of Event	N	(%)
Dates of Orthodox feasts	237	37
Ukrainian crisis	144	23
New churches/religious exhibitions	110	17
Statements of Church's representatives	93	15
Deaths of outstanding people	49	8
Total	633	100

The results of the study indicate that media represented supremacy of the Russian Orthodox Church close to papocaesarism. The most frequently used frame can be labelled as “comprehensive Orthodoxy”. It concerns with the claim that Orthodoxy is the basis for country's unity and Russian identity. The political importance of Orthodoxy is postulated by President Putin who declares that the progress of Russia is not possible without spiritual, cultural and national identity; otherwise the State will not be able to withstand internal and external challenges. The key idea of all news stories is that Russia is not a separate state, but mostly a distinctive civilization, at the forefront of which are spiritual, not material, goods based on Orthodox faith and moral values of Orthodoxy, that make Russia dramatically different from Western civilization. Accordingly, Orthodoxy is represented in Russian state-owned media as a basis for policy, and the ROC as a source of state ideology. For instance, Patriarch Kirill considers that “Russians should save the unity of country, created and bequeathed by ancestors. This unity cannot be achieved only by force; its solid foundation should be constituted on spiritual and moral community of people living in the country, a community of values” (<http://www.1tv.ru/news/other/271618>, 11.11.2014)

There are two significant examples demonstrating the relationship between the State and the Church. The first one is related to the statement of the head of the Synodal Department for Church and Society Chaplin:

We have to defend our right to have a strong central government and the welfare state which focus not only on the needs of ordinary men, but the conciliar voice, the collective mind. People and

authority in Russia have always felt unified. The gap between the people and the government does not exist in Russia and is only an imposed alien concept. But this unity of the people and the government is impossible without faith, which is why the value of faith is central (<http://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=2473526>, 02.04.15).

The second belongs to journalist Solovyov who is the author of the documentary about President Putin:

It is important for Putin to communicate with people and to feel himself as the messenger of people in power. The Patriarch called it wisely, ‘It is not a job, it is a ministry’. (<http://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=2523754>, 22.04.2015).

Moreover, the Patriarch is portrayed as government employee or politician in Russian media. Journalists cover events with his participation: his birthday and name day, meetings and comments on various socio-political issues.

The frame “comprehensive Orthodoxy” is maintained through several framing devices. The first one turns public's attention to the heroic past, common for all Russians. Paramilitary image of the Church in the media is associated with the military battles, war heroes and generals. It can be regarded as an attempt to build social consensus on the single “correct version” of Russian history (Torbakov, 2014). For example,

Sergius of Radonezh - a saint, who has a special place in the history of Russia. He inspired the Russian soldiers to liberate Rus from the foreign yoke, he urged the princes to join their principality into a strong power. St. Sergius, who founded a monastery in honor of the Holy Trinity, had created the ideal of holiness Russian - Unity and sacrificial love. (<http://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=1809021>, 18.07.2014)

The dates of remarkable battles are often described in a religious context. The following news can be cited as a notable example. Patriarch Kirill has consecrated the monument to Prince Dmitry Donskoyset upon the site where according to tradition, the troops gathered before the battle of Kulikovo. The Prime Minister Medvedev at the opening ceremony announced that Prince Dmitry Donskoy has shown that it is possible to oppose a very powerful force against Russia with faith and achieve freedom and independence (<http://www.1tv.ru/news/other/258285>, 08.05.2014). It is noteworthy

that Orthodoxy is naturally embedded in the triad “Orthodoxy, State, Army,” where the army and Orthodoxy are exceptional support of the State in protecting against an external enemy. Quite often, the ROC declares that certain saints are patrons of a certain kind of troops or profession. For example, Patriarch Kirill met with the staff of Moscow underground, and signed a memorandum between the Church and the underground.

Another framing device that maintains the frame “comprehensive Orthodoxy” is closely related to representation of the ROC in media as a genuine bearer of Russian patriotic and cultural ideas and values. Media version of such concepts as tradition, nation, patriotism, culture is interrelated with the uniqueness and greatness of Orthodoxy. State-owned media describe the ROC as the guardian of Russian tradition and the factor of consolidation in the face of a common enemy. Events in Ukraine and continually broadcasted news about attacks on churches and murders of priests had significant impact on this understanding. As Patriarch Kirill appeals: “Orthodox children of Holy Russia should pray to the Lord for the pacification of the Ukraine, for the end of violence, for the reign of peace”. He emphasizes that “the people of holy Rus will never be enemies to each other and no one will ever be able to use a holy nation to push them into internecine warfare, weaken their spiritual life - orthodoxy” (<http://www.1tv.ru/news/other/256853>, 19.04.2014). Obviously, for promoting the image of the ROC as “the guardian of the traditions and the bearer of greatness” anti-Western and anti-democratic rhetoric is required. Representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church claim that a serious discussion about how to eliminate homosexuality from society is needed. They put forward proposals to ban homosexuality, not only in moral standards, but in law. The ROC openly admits that the West is a marginal community that contributes to the destruction of the family and, ultimately, self-destruction of the nation.

In analyzing coverage of the ROC, we will inevitably have to analyze the statements of the Patriarch. Depending on the modification of political agenda Patriarch Kirill’s rhetoric has been undergoing changes from foreign policy to domestic policy issues. For 2014 Ukraine was the main theme for Patriarch’s speeches. Thus, he repeatedly stressed that the Church was able to help in resolving the crisis

only by praying.

Today we live in a time when there are military conflicts and the danger of major war. In the current context - it is a World War. And the Church appeals to the whole world, to all governments ... that achieving of goals through war is impossible. Today ... in this troubled time we do not cease to pray for the prevention of civil conflict, internecine warfare in Ukraine, in order to this conflict to never, under any circumstances, be turned into a big, terrible war. (<http://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=1860182,01.08.2014>)

Since November 2014, the Patriarch has been urging to consider the positive aspects of the current economic situation, including sanctions against Russia:

We are going through difficult times, I understand the concerns and anxieties of people for their families, for relatives, for the future, but we know that God does not deprive the mercy of our people when we do not lose faith (<http://www.1tv.ru/news/other/275268>, 07.01.2015),

We have a good Russian proverb: "There is a blessing in disguise. "And we had to go through this experience, to realize the necessity of relying on its own strength (<http://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=2492061>, 09.04.2015).

Patriarch Kirill constantly urged Russian believers to unite in face of new multidimensional threats and difficulties by awakening the national consciousness. Since the Church is the bearer of stable ideology, such statements can be described as socio-therapeutic and protective. This can be considered as psychological assistance to people aimed to calm and reassure the public mind.

Conclusion and Discussion

This study is set out to examine how Russian state-owned media “Perviikanal” and “Rossia” framed the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in 2014-2015. We conducted a qualitative content analysis of 633 separate documents in order to identify and categorize the way stories were framed. More specifically, our analyses focused on how these media determine the interaction of the Russian Orthodox Church and State.

We found that all news stories were positive or neutral toward the ROC. Based on the analysis we concluded that the dominant strategy used by the ROC during the study period was permanent presence on the media scene. The most frequently used frame

label led “comprehensive Orthodoxy” concerned with the claim that Orthodoxy was the foundation of country’s unity and Russian identity. In our view, the identified frame is maintained through several framing devices. The first one turns the public’s attention to the heroic past common for all Russians. It should be noted that media representation of Orthodoxy is naturally embedded in the triad “Orthodoxy, State, Army,” where the army and Orthodoxy are exceptional support of the State in protecting against an external enemy. Another framing device that maintains the frame “comprehensive Orthodoxy” is closely related with representation of ROC in media as a genuine bearer of Russian patriotic and cultural ideas and values. Media version of such concepts as tradition, nation, patriotism, culture is interrelated with the uniqueness and greatness of Orthodoxy. When we examined the way the ROC and Orthodoxy were defined, we identified media’s claimed position: Russia only retains its greatness as the state on the basis of Orthodox spiritual values and support of Orthodoxy as the traditional religion. State-owned media describe the ROC as the guardian of Russian tradition and the factor of consolidation in the face of common enemy, and the Patriarch as a person who calms and reassures public minds.

The results of this study are obviously limited to Russia during a specific time period and specific issue, and should not be generalized to other media sources including Russian. Our chief aim was to examine the relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and the State through the media. However, the results may also contribute to religious studies and the concept of framing.

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