

## Digital news platforms and mediatization of religion: Understanding the religious coverage in different 'News Frames'

### Plataformas digitais de notícias: a cobertura religiosa em diversos tipos de enquadramento noticioso

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**Abstract:** *Mass Media has been influencing a dominant sector of the society called 'Religion' from the time of its inception. Today, in the age of digital journalism the news consumption has increased in many folds and the mediatization of religion has taken a bigger shape on digital news platforms where feedback on every news story is instantaneous. To understand the intensity of mediatization of religion the coverage of religious specific content in two top rated digital news platforms of English language were analysed using thematic content analysis in the following news frames "Attribution of Responsibility," "Human Interest," "Morality," "Economic Consequences," and "Conflict." The findings helped in identifying the level of social interaction expressed by the readers towards religion and the implication of different news frames on creating strong influence on people. The study is conducted in a country where multiple religions are practiced from eternities by large groups of people forming a society.*

**Keywords:** *Digital News platforms; Mediatization; Religion; News Frames and Society.*

**Palavras-chave:** *plataformas digitais de notícias; midiatização; religião; enquadramento noticioso e sociedade.*

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## Introduction

Media is the reflection of society and it creates a new paradigm by becoming the voice of the people. “Particularly in the current era of media saturation, where the majority of our experiences are mediatized, the media are among the most significant institutions in peoples’ daily lives” (Pink & Mackley, 2013, p. 677–691).

Society is changing rapidly. New technology has changed the way people think. These changes are reflected in the media as well, and when it comes to coverage of religious news, the percentage of mediatization shows itself in a new way. “The landscape of news dissemination and its effects on society have undergone a significant transformation in an era characterized by the relentless advancement of technology and the expanding influence of digital platforms. In recent years, the concept has undergone revisions and been given the name “mediatization” in an effort to expand the framework by incorporating new media and application areas” (Finnemann, 2011, p. 67-89). Religion is an essential part of human civilization. When it comes to a continent like India, religion has the power to change the way of life as well as the way of thinking and understanding and even the habits. “Mediation lies at the core of religion. The dynamics of mediation have always been crucial for any sound understanding of religious communication. Religions are cultural laboratories for mediated communication” (Thomas, G., 2016, p. 37-47). Traditional notions of news reporting have transcended geographical boundaries, connecting individuals across the globe in real-time. Amidst this paradigm shift, the portrayal of religion within the digital news sphere has emerged as a captivating and complex area of study. “In order to highlight the highly uneven nature of media-related religious transformation and the ongoing domestication of modern media practices into long-standing religious paradigms, mediatization is defined as the subsumption of religion under an external media apparatus” (Patrick Eisenlohr, 2017, p. 869-884). The interplay between digital news platforms and the mediatization of religion offers a fascinating lens through which to comprehend the dynamic interaction between media,

belief systems, and societal perceptions. “In a different way, any perspective on the mediatization of religion would compel it to be forcedly limited and focused on a few issues, leaving others inevitably behind” (Luis Mauro Sá Martino, 2020, p. 482). As traditional media outlets coalesce with the digital realm, the coverage of religion finds itself at the nexus of evolving journalistic practices, technological advancements, and changing audience expectations. The mediatization of religion refers to the multifaceted process by which religious beliefs, rituals, and identities are influenced by media outlets and, in turn, how these beliefs shape media content. Within this intricate web, ‘news frames’ serve as a pivotal construct that shapes the way religious narratives are presented, interpreted, and received by diverse audiences. “With regard to the causes, elements, and effects of urban growth, societal-gain frame combinations produce the most in-depth cognitions. News frames interact to produce more or less complex cognitive responses. We discuss future directions for media framing research” (Shah, D. V., Kwak, N., Schmierbach, M., & Zubric, J. 2004 p. 102-120). This thesis embarks on an exploration of the mediatization of religion within digital news platforms, delving into the various ‘news frames’ that encapsulate and define religious coverage. “Individual existing issue schemas and predispositions are important factors to consider in framing research” (Shen, F. 2004, p. 400-416).

A ‘news frame’ can be understood as a cognitive structure that shapes how a news story is contextualized, emphasizing certain aspects while downplaying others. This study aims to dissect the interplay between digital news platforms and the mediatization of religion by scrutinizing the distinct ways. When news is served on India’s digital platform, it is dominated by Conflict news frame, followed by Human Interest, Attribution of Responsibility, Morality, Economic Consequences.

“The concept of framing has grown into a thriving approach to analyzing media content and its effects, but it has also been described as a fractured or fragmented paradigm” (Brüggemann, M., & D’Angelo, P. 2018, p. 90-111). Religion is a necessary evil in India. That’s why many

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layers of religion are reflected in the media as well. Even the so-called modern online media has not been spared from it. The mediatization of religion creates a different set of circumstances which cannot stand the test of journalistic ethics. The emergence of political cannot be ignored in this new epochal change of journalism. Starting from Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp's (2013) This approach primarily adheres to "the social-constructivist tradition," which focuses on the role of various media in the communicative construction of socio-cultural reality. This approach represents two main approaches to the mediatization concept. (cf. Lundby, 2013: p. 197). Mediatization is an inevitable character, then political influence is the open display of the dark truth of the media. In such a situation, politics seems to affect the ethics of journalism, and clearly while serving religious news, somewhere in the mind, there is a thought that what will be the impact of this news on the public mind and how much it will benefit or harm any political party. The research paper also focuses into implications of these different frames and how they contribute to the mediatization of religion. "The news media go beyond 'just the facts' when reporting on public affairs. Additionally, they offer frames, which are storytelling devices that offer interpretations of the reports" (Gross, K., & Brewer, P. R. 2007, p. 122-133). Media shapes and frames the processes and discourse of political-social communication in which that communication takes place. This paper tries to find the interrelationship between E-media, religious news, social harmony, social relation and Mediatization.

## Research Questions

"Frames defined the ways that readers presented information about issues in their thought-listing responses and played a significant role in these responses" (Valkenburg, P. M., Semetko, H. A., & De Vreese, C. H. 1999, p. 550-569). Our theoretical interest is that we can compare different news frames used in digital news articles and know how much news websites focus on religious mediatization. For this we have the following research questions-

**RQ-1-** What role does religion play in the mediatization of news on digital platforms, and how does this differ depending on the news frame?

**RQ-2-** What effects might the mediatization of religion have on how the general public views religion and religious organisations, and how might these effects change depending on the news framing used?

**RQ-3-** What are the potential difficulties in putting such techniques into practise, and how might the results of this study inspire tactics for encouraging more impartial and nuanced coverage of religion on digital news platforms?

## Method

Religion-based news in digital media influences everything from politics to crime beat. Religion can be the basis of any hard news. Mediatization of religion and its study advises us that the way of presenting news can be different in different segments of online media. “The interaction between a particular form of media and a religious setting determines whether or not religion has been mediatized” (Lövheim 2011, p. 153-166). India is an agricultural country as well as a religion-based country. Society learns the lesson of morality from religion but yes, it is also a big question whether religion is also misused for political interests? “Intimate circles and large gatherings are ideal examples of the social forms of religion practised today; they are complementary to one another” (Gauthier, F. 2014, p. 261-271). Mediatization is reflected in the things that make society transformative. They make those things move which are the basic elements of the structure of society. “Mediatization refers to long-term changes in social and cultural norms, with the media playing a significant role in the social fabric but not necessarily as the primary driver of change” (Hjarvard 2013; Lundby 2014, p. 185-202).

This study proceeds from a quantitative content analysis of frames used in 55 news stories from two top rated news websites in the country. In this, news articles from 1 July to 30 July 2022 were included. During this, the news shook the whole country. On June 28, a tailor named

Kanhaiya Lal was murdered in Udaipur city of Rajasthan state of India. Two such people who belonged to another community were accused of carrying out this murder.

The murder began with a controversial statement made by Nupur Sharma, a then leader of the ruling BJP, in a TV debate. After the statement given against the worshiper of a particular religion, demonstrations started happening everywhere. Meanwhile, a post in support of Nupur Sharma was released from Kanhaiyalal's social media account. After which Kanhaiya was brutally murdered. This incident agitated the country. The electronic media reported the incident vigorously and tried to get away from journalism into partisanship. In such a situation, it would have been interesting to see how the digital platform covered this burning incident. This incident presented an opportunity to study how the leading digital media covered this major crime and its impact on society. We coded the two highly rated English websites, [timesofindia.indiatimes.com](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com) and [hindustantimes.com](http://hindustantimes.com). Readers are familiar with these websites. We briefly describe them in terms of audience size and style of reporting.

*Website description-* [timesofindia.indiatimes.com](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com) is the highest rated website according to the ranking agency comScore, while [hindustantimes.com](http://hindustantimes.com) is a few notches down but both the websites are most popular among the public, the condition is that neck to neck fight is always going on in Delhi between the newspapers of both the websites. While [timesofindia.indiatimes.com](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com) is full of news, [hindustantimes.com](http://hindustantimes.com) is dominated by exclusive news and feature stories. - In [timesofindia.indiatimes.com](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com), sensational news is more available, while [hindustantimes.com](http://hindustantimes.com) has more serious and informative news. In the current era, both the websites also give enough space to religion-based news. This space increases further when such an event comes which is political in nature but has its origin from the element of religion. In the last few years, there has been a flood of such news and this news is playing a very important role in forming opinions.

**Framing Measure-**To see the reflection of the news frames mentioned in different stories, we have divided the stories into different news frames at our discretion. Because every news has a different aspect and if it is about religious news, then in every such news there is a glimpse of the relativity of the society. In such a situation, the classification of news stories was done according to their nature and it was ensured that every news could be rendered correctly so that when this news was extracted, the society would get the right conclusions. We used another method to construct religion-based news from July 1 to July 30, 2022, into different news frames. We got that table; the table was verified by different journalists. Using their experience and discretion, the journalists put the frames of the news stories taken out for research in their own order. Apart from news of religious importance, our framing analysis also included religion-based crime, social disruption. For this, we focused completely on news samples. Each news item was read carefully and an attempt was made to know how the digital medium gives events a topical form and how they deeply affect the hearts and minds of the people.

### **Data analysis using ATLAS.ti**

In [timesofindia.indiatimes.com](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com) and [hindustantimes.com](http://hindustantimes.com), software called ATLAS.ti was used to understand the frequency of words, sentiment used in news, mood of news, text search. We saved the content of all the 55 news items extracted from [timesofindia.indiatimes.com](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com) and [hindustantimes.com](http://hindustantimes.com) from 1 to 31 July 2022 in separate word files and they were tested in ATLAS.ti. The content of both the websites was tested using ATLAS.ti's tool called Word Frequencies, Sentiment Analysis, Text Search and Network.

### **Findings**

“Particularly in the current era of media saturation, where the majority of our experiences are mediatized, the media are among the most significant institutions in peoples’ daily lives” (Pink & Mackley, 2013,

p. 677–691). Revolutionary changes have been witnessed in the Indian news landscape. Talking about the last decade, a radical change in the format of news can be clearly seen.

“When the established model of news writing—the inverted pyramid model—fails to address the media industry’s concerns, the journalistic paradigm of news writing can be modified and replaced. This change in journalistic perception towards the narrative style documents the hierarchical relationship between the occupational ideology and the market ideology” (Shim, H. 2014, p. 77-95).

Apart from traditional news mediums, the structure of news has completely changed in digital platforms as well. “Those who are more religious have a tendency to search for confirmation bias while those who are not are more critical of domestic news media” (Guidon, J. P., & Clegg, A. W. 2017, p. 1).

A new pattern has started in the way of telling news, fabricating news, bombarding news, which does not allow news to remain news, but gives it new dimensions. Our attempt was to investigate and measure the spectrum of religious content served in digital media.

The techniques we used; we got new facts. The result of dividing the news into different news frames was that we got a new ratio of the way of serving the news. We take stock of the religious news for July 2022. After extracting the news coverage of [timesofindia.indiatimes.com](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com) and [hindustantimes.com](http://hindustantimes.com), analysing them and fitting them into the news frame, the following results were obtained-

- Conflict news frame is the most commonly used news frame in both news websites, accounting for 62% of the articles analysed, Followed by attribution of responsibility 22%, human interest 8%, morality 6% and economic consequences 2%.
- The mediatization of religion sets a trend that not only reflects readership trends, but also suggests that social values and concerns are being lost to online versions of news. They are creating such a mass whose culmination is political selfishness.



- It reveals that crimes arising out of religion are being presented in a very aggressive manner on online news platforms.
- The research results prove that morality is dominated by conflict, which can be understood to reflect the trends in society that are underlying these reports.
- The news with a cocktail of religion and crime which can bring disharmony in the society, the intensity of such news is very high. In a way, such news is being bombarded.

Table 1. Frequency of religious based news in different news-frames

SN	NEWS FRAME	timesofindia. indiatimes.com	hindustantimes. com	TOTAL
1	Conflict	20	14	34
2	Attribution of Responsibility	9	3	12
3	Human Interest	3	2	5
4	Morality	2	1	3
5	Economic Consequences	1	0	1
		35	20	55

**Conflict frame-** According to Schuck, A. R., Vliegenthart, R., & De Vrese, C. H. (2016 p. 177-194) “Conflict-driven news is not only a natural and almost inherent feature of election campaigns but in the context of religious news the conflict frame emerges in a different sense.” The content analysis of two leading digital news platforms clearly shows that the conflict frame is the most effective. Websites made more use of this news frame to present news related to religion. The Kanhaiya Lal murder case of Udaipur completely dominated the month of July 2022. News websites gave great importance to this news. It was found from the analysis that such angles were inserted in the presentation of this news from which the conflict news frame emerged. From this, it can be estimated that when this news would have passed in front of the readers, how they

would have reacted to it. There is also a political aspect to this news. Which can be discussed separately.

**Attribution of Responsibility-** Fishbein, M., & Ajzen, I. (1973, p. 148-153) suggest “research on factors influencing attribution of responsibility has resulted in inconsistent and inconclusive findings”. It is clear from the analysis that this frame is more dominated in timesofindia.indiatimes.com than hindustantimes.com. This news frame is most important. Actually, this news frame is the soul of journalism. The analysis shows that news websites have less interest in this frame because if more attention is paid to this frame, then the news of religion-based crime cannot be made more sensational.

**Human Interest-** Human interest is a big element of any news story. Hong, H. (2013, p. 452-460) find “human interest framing of medical news stories can increase audiences’ involvement in those stories and facilitate their positive perception of medical advances.” but in the presentation of religious news, this news frame is seen to be disrespectful. Both the websites seem to be making little use of this news frame. The reason for this is also that aggressive frames were adopted in the news related to religion.

**Morality** – An, S. K. (2011) suggests Moral news frames can be used practically to reduce public anger. In this frame, timesofindia.indiatimes.com has 2 news items and hindustantimes.com has 1 news item. The study, conducted over a period of one month, suggests that the morality frame does not matter much for online media. If the decrease in the level of news is considered as a factor, then it can be understood why this condition of news has happened.

**Economic Consequences-** Neuman, R., Just, M., & Crigler, A. (1992) also identify it as a common frame in the news. Analysis shows that this frame was totally ignored. Hindustantimes.com could not find a single news story in this frame. This also means that digital news platforms keep economic issues in another category and do not mix them with other serious news.

## Atlas-ti Result

We took the help of ATLAS-ti to explore further. The results we got with the help of this software are as follows:

**1- Word Frequencies-** With the help of this tool in ATLAS.ti, we came to know how many words were used in both the websites. This helped to understand that in July 2022, the websites of two leading newspapers of the country used how many words to present their news.

Table 2. Words frequency as per ATLAS.ti

	timesofindia. indiatimes.com	hindustantimes.com	Total
Kanhaiya	41	36	77
Religious	12	54	66
People	39	19	58
BJP	40	15	55
Religion	29	16	45
Country	12	20	32
Hindu	16	8	24
Muslim	5	15	20
Freedom	0	19	19
Worship	3	15	18
Community	5	8	13
Total	202	225	427

**2-Sentiment Analysis-** For the use of this tool, we created five codes named Religion, Hindu, Muslims, Worship and Nation. Total 285 paragraphs containing sentiments. How many sentiments came under which code is as follows:

Table 3. Sentiment Analysis with codes

Negative Sentiment	92
Neutral Sentiment	158
Positive Sentiment	35
Total	285

**3-Text Search-** Through this tool, an attempt was made to find out how many words have been entered in different paragraphs of the news of both the websites. According to our theme, we filled four words namely Hindu, Muslim, Religion, Politics. For the help of this toll of ATLAS.ti we found how many paragraphs containing all inflected forms of Hindu, Muslim, Religion and Politics and got the following results.

Table 4. Text Search as per theme

	Religion	Hindu	Muslim	Politics
timesofindia. indiatimes.com	20 Paragraph containing all inflected forms	12 Paragraph containing all inflected forms	5 Paragraph containing all inflected forms	4 Paragraph containing all inflected forms
hindustantimes. com	17 Paragraph containing all inflected forms	6 Paragraph containing all inflected forms	14 Paragraph containing all inflected forms	1 Paragraph containing all inflected forms

**4-Network-** With the help of this tool, an attempt was made to establish interconnection between different codes. The software's algorithms produced a chart that showed how the news we extracted from the two websites for a month related to each other.

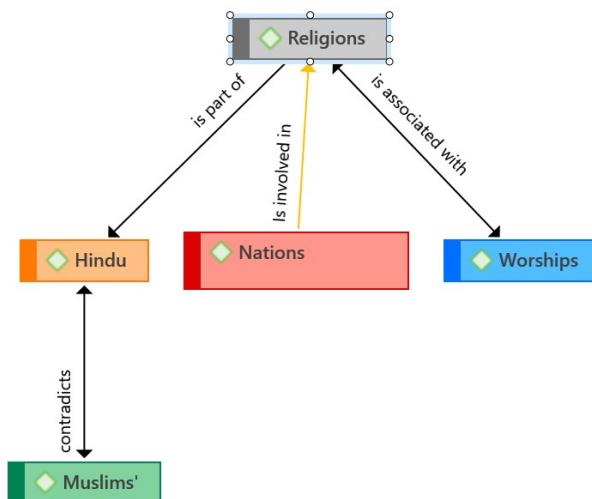


Figure 1. Interconnections between different codes

Television news differed significantly from the press in utilizing this frame less often. Within the press, this frame occurred significantly more often in the two most serious and sober newspapers. Within television news, there was no significant difference in the use of this frame. Our analysis shows that this frame was totally ignored. Hindustantimes.com could not find a single news story in this frame. This also means that digital news platforms keep economic issues in another category and do not mix them with other serious news.

## Conclusion

The bombardment of religious news in news websites suggests a trend of mediatization of religion. This shows that there has been a change in the reading interest of readers but could also indicate the decline in social values and focus on political interests. The research revealed that news related to religious crimes were given a very prominent place. A touch of sensationalism was also added to it. The trend of news seems to have changed. In the cyber age, the audience likes to watch news with a new style. The reason for this could also be the abundance of sources of information. On testing the hidden sentiment of the news, it was found that there is a predominance of neutral sentiment. (Table no. 3) But it also became clear that negative sentiment dominates positive sentiment. This also means that people like to read negative news in online media. The preponderance of neutral sentiment was also seen because unlike contemporary news, religious crime news displaced different frames and codes. The behaviour of online news has changed rapidly. This behaviour increases further when there is a political angle behind any religious news. The analysis of word usage reveals prominent terms related to religion, politics, and specific cases, such as Kanhaiya Lal (Table No.1). It reveals the presence of inflected forms of words such as “Religion,” “Hindu,” “Muslim,” and “Politics.” Religion is visible in online media in two ways. One which is purely religious news and the other which is political news arising from religion. When this trend was studied in detail, it was found that the word religion was used in many

ways. For example, religion routine is not only in the news but also in the contemporary scenario which indicates the political character of the society. That is why Hindu, Muslim and other religions have been mentioned repeatedly in the news (Table No. 4). The interconnection between different codes reveals the interconnectedness of news items. The analysis reveals a significant shift in news format, particularly in digital news, with conflict and sensationalism dominating religious content reporting, while “Morality” and “Economic Consequences” receive less attention, raising questions about the impact on readers and societal implications of mediatized religion.

### **Discussion over the research questions**

If it is said that the mass media is influenced by the ideas of the party who is in power, then it would not be wrong. Durante, R., & Knight, B. (2012) suggest That with the change in power, the way the public consumes mass media also changes. The public watches more the content of the ideology which is in power. Sometimes religion and rituals regulate Ideology. Driskell, R., Embry, E., & Lyon, L. (2008) refer Different types of religious beliefs influence political participation differently. Religion significantly influences the mediatization of news on digital platforms, serving as both a subject and a catalyst for coverage. However, in relation to RQ 1 the media’s portrayal of religion can vary depending on the news frame, with some stories focusing on religious events, ceremonies, or activities, aiming to inform and engage the audience, often targeting individuals with specific religious interests or affiliations. Aghili, M., & Kumar, G. V. (2008) found total religious attitude to be highly correlated with Happiness. Religion can be linked to politics, leading to news stories discussing the intersection of religion and political interests. These stories may address issues like religious freedom, religious group influence, or conflicts arising from religious differences. The choice of news frame can significantly influence religion’s perception in the media. Pure religious news frames can promote understanding of different faiths and practices, while political news frames may polarize and

portray religion as a source of conflict and division. The mediatization of religion can significantly influence public perceptions of religion and religious organizations. It can promote understanding and respect for different religious traditions, promote cultural awareness, and enhance charitable work. However, in relation to RQ 2 news frames that focus on conflicts, religious crimes, or political dimensions can lead to a perception of religion as a source of tension and violence. Sensationalism in religious news can contribute to stereotypes and misconceptions about religious groups. Overemphasis on negative aspects can erode trust in religious institutions. Krok, D. (2018) suggests both the subjective quality of life dimensions and life satisfaction were significantly influenced by religiousness. The effects of mediatization can change based on the framing used, with positive news promoting interfaith dialogues and cooperation, while negative news focusing on religious extremism and conflict can lead to negative perceptions. Balancing positive and negative framing can shape public attitudes towards religion and its organizations. Encouraging impartial and nuanced coverage of religion on digital news platforms is challenging due to factors such as ownership biases, audience preferences, and financial constraints. This indicates the answer of RQ3. Balancing journalistic ethics and responsible reporting is essential, as media outlets often cater to sensational or polarizing religious news. In-depth, nuanced reporting may require substantial resources, including skilled reporters and researchers. Editors and journalists also make choices about which stories to cover and how to frame them, which can impact the tone and content of religious news.

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