

Most Americans say media coverage of religion too sensationalized

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In a new survey of journalists and their audiences, fewer than one-fifth of reporters call themselves “very knowledgeable” about religion.

Two-thirds of the American public says religion coverage is too sensationalized in the news media – a view held by less than 30 percent of reporters, according to the results of a survey released Thursday.

And less than one-fifth of journalists, or 18.9 percent, say they are “very knowledgeable” about [religion](#). Most reporters in that minority say they are mainly familiar with their own religious traditions, not the wider array of faiths and practices, the survey showed.

The results come from a first-of-its-kind survey of both reporters and the audiences they serve by the Knight Program in Media and Religion at the University of Southern California and the Ray C. Bliss Institute of

Applied Politics at The University of Akron.

Reporters' understanding of religion is lacking

“News organizations are rightly worried about creating smart business plans and developing cutting-edge technology. But they’re overlooking their most basic resource: knowledgeable reporters,” said Diane Winston, Knight Chair in Media and Religion at the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism. “[News consumers](#) want more reporting on authentic religious experience and a lot less on polarizing religious politics. But reporters can’t do that if all they know about religion is what they hear in church or—ironically—what they read in the news.”

A majority of both the public and reporters agree the news media “does a poor job of explaining religion in society,” with 57.1 percent and 51.8 percent agreeing, respectively.

Both the public and reporters ranked TV news lowest in the quality and quantity of religion coverage compared to other media with 28.1 percent of the public and 8 percent of reporters responding that broadcast news provided “good” religion coverage.

The report is based on two surveys conducted between Feb. 15 and May 11, 2010 by the Center for Marketing and Opinion Research in Akron.

The first was a telephone survey of a national random sample of 2,000 American adults with a margin of error of +/- 3 percentage points. The second was an online survey distributed to a random sample of journalists with 800 usable responses and a margin of error of +/- 4 percentage points.

Religion's increasing influence

“Religion figures into American politics, popular culture, foreign policy and even the economy more strongly than ever before,” said Dr. John C. Green, director of the Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics, who managed the study. “But the disconnect between news consumers and producers suggests that current news media coverage isn’t making the importance of these overlapping relationships clear. This situation presents the [news media](#) with both a challenge and an opportunity at a moment when innovation in the profession is paramount.”

Among the study's other findings:

- The American public sees religion in starkly polarized terms. Nearly half, or 43.6 percent believes religion is a source of conflict in the world, while a narrow majority, 52.6 percent, sees it as a fount of good. Most reporters, 56.1 percent, consider religion to be a mixed bag, offering both benefits and drawbacks for society. But only 3.8 percent of the public shares this more circumspect angle on religion.
- Not surprisingly, then, most reporters believe their audiences want personality-driven religion news related to specific institutions and events. But despite the aforementioned polarization, 69.7 percent of Americans say they're interested in more complex coverage that looks at religious experiences and spiritual practice.
- A strong majority of the public, 62.5 percent, says religion coverage is important to them, but nearly one-third of the rapidly growing cohort of those with no religious affiliation say they aren't interested in religion coverage.
- Christians from ethnic minorities constitute over a third of news

consumers who say they are generally very interested in the news and have a particular interest in religion. In contrast, white evangelical Protestants tend to care specifically about religion news, but less about the [news](#) in general.

Funding for the survey was provided by the Ford Foundation.

More information: Download [the full report](#).

Provided by University of Akron

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