intersections

Article

Reinventing How Journalists and Religious Scholars Communicate

January 10, 2024

A workshop on new approaches to portraying religious traditions in the media.

Have you noticed any patterns in the way that religion is portrayed in the media? For instance, how are Muslims usually characterized? Does the depiction of Muslims differ from how Christians or Buddhists are portrayed? What images or concepts come to mind when someone mentions Vodou? Have you ever paused to consider the spiritual roots of Black classical music (jazz) or the religious messages that may be hidden in major feature films?

RoR_programDownload

The Workshop

On March 16, 2018, Northeastern University hosted the workshop “Reporting on Religion: Rethinking the Ways Journalists and Scholars Communicate.” The purpose of the workshop was to assemble journalists and religious studies scholars to chart new ways of approaching stories about communities of faith. This involved addressing the

tropes, caricatures, and stereotypes that journalists often employ when talking about certain religious communities while others escape the kind of critical analysis that is necessary for a true understanding of our world. The workshop consisted of two roundtable discussions, one among journalists and another among scholars. It also included other conversations in which professionals engaged with each other and the students of the “Reporting on Religion” course. As part of this course, the students also engaged in their own reporting on religion in Boston and in Granada, Spain.

Professors and students participate in a discussion about reporting on religion. Source: Ethics

Institute at Northeastern University.

Case Study: Understanding Buddhist Nationalism and the Rohingya Genocide

The case study conversation interrogated the mainstream media coverage of the Rohingya genocide in Myanmar. Myanmar is a Buddhist-majority nation, and since few people associate Buddhists with violence or nationalism, the decades-long persecution of Rohingya Muslims in this region of the world has gone mostly overlooked by major media outlets. More broadly, this conversation explored how the specific assumptions journalists and commentators hold about particular groups (in this case Muslims and Buddhists) can profoundly affect their ability to hold policymakers accountable.

In addition to the debates unfolding at Northeastern University, the workshop generated lively discussion on social media under the hashtag #NEURelReport. Below are a few of the live tweets from the day's events.

> #NEUrelreport @aymanndotcom: often ask if there's anything else the journalist should have asked about? What are your concerns about how these stories are usually covered?
>
> — Dr. Megan Goodwin (@mpgPhD) March 16, 2018

> How can journalists and scholars interact/communicate more effectively?

> #NEUrelreport
>
> — Luke Dean (@lukecdean) March 16, 2018

> Always ask yourself: does this add to the conversation? @SymonsBrown says this can prevent overly sensational content #NEURelReport
>
> — Paxtyn Merten (@paxtynmerten) March 16, 2018

> @aymanndotcom “where does the line begin and end between activism and journalism?” #NEURelReport
>
> — Emily Mitchell (@katemilymitch) March 16, 2018