

DOROTA HALL

Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences

MARTA KOŁODZIEJSKA

Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences

## COVID-19 Pandemic, Mediatization and the Polish Sociology of Religion

*Abstract:* The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic restrictions limited access to religious services and forced religious organizations to move most activities online, thus amplifying the processes of mediatization. They have also brought to light the existing power relations and hierarchies among and within the Churches, among others in the context of minority-majority relations. This context opens up new avenues for research on the topics of mediatization and power relations. We argue that in order to give an accurate account of pandemic-related developments, sociology of religion would benefit from employing user-centric research perspectives and a constructivist concept of mediatization. Analyzing research done on the topic of religion and the media in Poland to date, we present the key premises of our research project deploying the Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse, and highlight how it may be of use to Polish sociologists of religion.

*Keywords:* COVID-19 pandemic, mediatization, Poland, methodology, religious minorities, sociology of religion

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic triggered an immediate response from scholars of various academic disciplines, among them the scholars of religion. Some pointed to the increased vulnerability of religious groups and organizations, particularly those of a minority status, to the stigmatization and exclusion that draw new strength from public panic and uncertainty related to the mechanisms of knowledge production and circulation (Consorti 2020). Others reflected on the rapid changes in the forms of religious practice and pastoral care in times when lockdown policies forced them to go online (Campbell 2020). These reactions were quick interventions that built on the authors' previous works, and sought to provide the audience with basic interpretations of how the new conditions affect religious organizations and individuals.

One year after the coronavirus outbreak, the pandemic keeps inspiring academic reflection, and the public expects scholars to come forward with informed comments. In these circumstances, it is essential to ask what theoretical and methodological tools can be used in order to most adequately capture the ongoing social change that involves religion as it is lived, practiced and entangled in complex relationships engaging both religious and secular actors. This question is particularly relevant in the Polish context, especially if we consider that despite of the recent emergence of theoretically refined publications, the dominant current of the sociology of religion in Poland does not engage in a productive dialogue with social theory (Sekerdej and Pasięka 2013; Hall 2020).

This paper has three aims that respond to the aforementioned question. The first aim is to delineate the pandemic-generated lines of inquiry for sociological research on religion in Poland, ones that correspond to the recently increased focus of global sociology of religion on issues related to power relations (Altglas and Wood 2018). This will be done in the first part of this paper. The second aim is to map the territory of the Polish sociology of religion with a view to identify the most promising theoretical and methodological avenues for researching religion-related issues in the pandemic and post-pandemic times. In our opinion, one of the most significant results of the lockdown policies is the rapid acceleration of mediatization of all areas of human practices, including religion. We cannot know how sustainable the new modes of communication and religious participation will be after all restrictions are lifted, however, it is safe to assume that the overall trend of the increased media use by religious leaders and ordinary believers cannot be easily reversed; it will keep informing the way religion is practiced and religious message is communicated and negotiated. Hence, in the second part of this paper, the focal point of our discussion will be on the social studies of religion and the media. The last section will address the third aim of this paper, which is to give an example of a study that does justice to the developments in the mediatization of religion in the Polish context. We argue that the new situation generated by the pandemic requires the employment of user-centric and communicative approaches to mediatization sensitive to the issue of power relations, one which we apply to our ongoing project *Minorities and the Media: The communicative construction of religious identity in times of deep mediatization*, in which we examine, in cooperation with the partners from the University of Bremen, the media production of Orthodox Churches and the Seventh-Day Adventist Church in Poland and the UK.

### **Coronavirus, the Churches, and religious practice**

In Poland, the first case of confirmed coronavirus infection was publicly announced on March 4, 2020. Lockdown-type control measures were in place as early as March 10 with the cancellation of mass events, followed by the closures of educational and cultural institutions, as well as restaurants and non-essential shops within the next few days. The state of epidemic was officially declared by the Prime Minister on March 20, and since March 24, public gatherings were limited to a maximum of two people, with the exception of families, work places and religious gatherings—in which case, the limit of up to five participants plus the celebrant was set. After one month, restrictions of public and religious activity were eased. The allowed number of people in a temple was henceforth linked to the available area and the limit was set to one person per 15 square meters. In subsequent weeks, the restrictions were gradually lifted, but were reintroduced during the second wave of the pandemic in October, limiting the number of religious gatherings' attendants once again to one person per 15 square meters.<sup>1</sup>

The Churches' initial reaction to the information about the spread of the disease was highly diversified. Due to the religious composition of the Polish society, in more than 90%

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<sup>1</sup> For the detailed description of all pandemic-related regulations see: <https://www.gov.pl/web/koronawirus/dzialania-rzadu>.

self-declared as Roman Catholic (CBOS 2017), the voice from the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) was most strongly represented and vividly commented in the public realm. When the government announced the first restrictions, the Head of the Polish Bishops' Conference issued a recommendation for the priests to increase the number of masses so that the number of believers gathered in one place at the same time would be lower. He called "unimaginable" the lack of possibility to pray in churches.<sup>2</sup> On March 12, the Polish Bishops' Conference changed their approach and issued a decree that recommended all diocesan bishops to give believers dispensation from the obligation to attend Sunday masses, and encourage churchgoers to individual prayer and participation in liturgies broadcasted by the media.<sup>3</sup>

Minority Churches have also issued their statements. For instance, on March 12, the Executive Board of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church in Poland published recommendations on how to safely perform religious services, which ended with the following call:

*Realizing that what we are observing is inscribed in the signs of the times predicted by the Holy Bible, which testify to the condition of our planet before the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, we call for prayers for God to solve all the problems of this Earth.*<sup>4</sup>

In their communique from March 17, the Bishops' Council of the Polish Autocephalous Orthodox Church strongly recommended participation in sacraments, especially on weekdays when the churches are less crowded, and persuasively stated: "The St. Eucharist is the source of life, health of soul and body, against which no disease has power. Divine Eucharist—is a divine fire that burns all evil".<sup>5</sup>

It is clear from the quotes above that the coronavirus outbreak created an opportunity for the Churches to come forward with their perspectives on fundamental theological issues, such as the importance of prayer, eschatological visions, or the nature of the sacraments. All of this is a good starting point for academics to reflect on the way in which Churches of various traditions put their doctrine in practice and secure the topicality of their message by adjusting its content to the changing social circumstances.

Furthermore, the reactions of the RCC to the pandemic and the ensuing restrictions, followed by statements from individual bishops on societal issues loosely related to the pandemic, including "gender ideology,"<sup>6</sup> and the public discussion that involved secular opponents of RCC's visions—which, due to limited space, cannot be presented in detail in this paper—add new material to the pioneering sociological research on the cultural dominance of Roman Catholicism over secular perspectives in Poland (Tyrała 2014), or on the RCC's participation in struggles over gender-related issues (Szwed 2019), and also, on struggles over the Church-state separation (Szwed and Zielińska 2017).

As valuable as this kind of research is, it cannot do justice to the perspectives of fewer articulation possibilities on the public forum. Meanwhile, these marginal perspectives, when

<sup>2</sup> <https://episkopat.pl/przewodniczacy-episkopatu-kosciol-stosuje-sie-do-zalecen-sluzb-sanitarnych-ws-korona-wirusa/> (access 27.06.2020).

<sup>3</sup> <https://episkopat.pl/komunikat-rady-stalej-konferencji-episkopatu-polski-4/> (access 27.06.2020).

<sup>4</sup> <https://adwent.pl/koronawirus-apel-do-wiernych/> (access 27.06.2020).

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.orthodox.pl/komunikat-soboru-biskupow-ws-pandemii-koronawirusa/> (access 27.06.2020).

<sup>6</sup> Archbishop Wacław Depo compared the coronavirus threat to "gender ideology" and suggested the latter should be considered much more important. See Interview for Niedziela.TV: <https://tv.niedziela.pl/film/2941/W-kazdej-sytuacji-ufajmy-Bogu> (access 27.06.2020).

taken seriously as standpoints which cannot be relegated to the space of ethnographic curiosity, may shed light on some structural problems. If we approach the lockdown policies from the point of view of minority Churches, it becomes apparent that seemingly neutral governmental regulations, in theory affecting all religious organizations equally, in practice have strengthened the inequalities that result from the RCC's cultural dominance in Poland. Participants of our study interviewed in April and May 2020 provided an insight into this issue. When referring to the restrictions, one Polish editor of the Adventist Church media commented:

*The government, when these regulations were created, they probably did not care about the needs of religious minorities. Even those fifteen meters per person is calculated for those Churches that have, so to speak, hangars. And not chapels, rented premises, where small congregations gather. (...) So the interests of the Catholic Church were taken into account, the interests of minority Churches were not.*

This comment speaks to what has already been recognized in academic literature with reference to religious groups and organizations in Poland as “hierarchical pluralism” which means “a changeable configuration of social relations that both allows for and acknowledges diversity, while simultaneously making it clear which (ethnic/religious) group is dominant and norm-defining” (Pasięka 2015: 9). In social life, it translates into taking Roman Catholicism as a benchmark for everything related to religion. “Hierarchical pluralism” saturates all aspects of the social in Poland and is constantly enacted in countless practices, not only in everyday relationships between members of various religious communities (Pasięka 2015), but also in parliamentary debates (Zielińska 2018).

It would be unfair to accuse the government of a deliberate regulatory action against religious minorities. It is much more likely that the authorities simply did not take into account minority perspectives when issuing the decrees. That, however, is the problem: their ignorance builds on the existing hierarchies that permeate the Polish imagery and results in practices seen as discriminatory by those concerned. Further research is needed to understand the various aspects of how the pandemic has made visible, upheld, reinforced or perhaps redefined inequalities faced by the religious organizations in Poland.

If we consider other consequences of the pandemic for the Churches and religious practices, we cannot emphasize enough the importance of the fact that for religious communities and organizations, the governmental restrictions meant that a new model of operation had to be created. Religious officials and believers were confronted with the question of how religion can be practiced and church services offered if everyone is required to shelter in place, and churches and non-essential community services were temporarily closed. Whenever possible, religious organizations and their members resorted to using the digital media, which enabled them to conduct prayer meetings via Zoom and similar tools, stream religious services (including worship or funerals) on websites or YouTube, or create support groups via WhatsApp or Skype.

While the digitalization of Churches worldwide has been observed for decades, it is clear that the lockdown regulations have accelerated this process, increasing not only the number of activities that have been adapted to the online context, but also the variety of what is offered. For instance, the YouTube channel *Langusta na Palmie* [Langoustine on a Palm], run by the Dominican father Adam Szustak added to the wide variety of

videos (which include vlogs, Q&As, etc.) a regular mass livestream, and even gaming sessions.<sup>7</sup>

Another aspect of shifting almost all activity to digital media was that the content creators must, perhaps more mindfully than before, address various age groups with their messages, and make the latter accessible also to those users who are not tech-savvy. While for some Churches and their members the digital transition was at least partially smooth, as they have already used digital media to a large degree, for others this change was more difficult, due to the lack of resources or sufficient digital skills. This challenge may have forced all institutions to answer the questions of how to formulate and disseminate their message under the changed circumstances, and how to keep the churchgoers engaged when they cannot physically attend services.

The churchgoers also started to ask themselves new questions, one of the most popular being whether they should kneel down during masses streamed via TV or online. Furthermore, religious offer in the digital space increased so dramatically that believers were confronted with the necessity to make choices not available to them before. More broadly speaking, the new conditions may have influenced how ordinary followers defined the role of the Church in their life, and what forms of online contact were acceptable or particularly important to them.

In sum, the pandemic has likely changed the way that Churches and their members perceive the functions of digital media and religious presence online, and redefined the traditional forms of religious broadcast, bringing important consequences for the believers' religious engagement. This begs for the examination of processes of mediatization of religion from the perspective of media users. In our view, however, such an examination should not lose sight of the power relations and hierarchies that govern any social practice. Within the Churches, the accelerated mediatization of religion may have on the one hand minimized some inequalities and differences, such as the one between the clergy and the lay people by creating better conditions for the latter's voices to proliferate on the internet. On the other hand, it may have created new hierarchies, involving, for instance, the younger and older generations, the latter facing difficulties in using digital tools. The pandemic-driven mediatization may have also exposed or reinforced inequalities at the inter-Church level, advantaging religious organizations, in particular the RCC, already privileged by the law-guaranteed access to public media and the possibility to rely on ample financial resources, technological infrastructure, and highly educated media specialists. Finally, the accelerated mediatization has undoubtedly influenced the communication of the Churches' religious message and the way Church officials and believers position themselves within a wider discursive structure that delineates lines of conflict and provides a platform for struggles over meanings. In search for conceptual and methodological tools that best capture these processes, it is worthwhile to begin with a brief summary of the sociological research on religion and the media conducted in Poland so far.

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<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kNikfUZ0O20> (access 27.06.2020).

### Religion and the Media: Research to Date

There are two main currents of sociological research on religion and the media in Poland. The first one studies discourses on religion and discourses produced by religious actors in the media. This approach emerged in connection with the wide public concern over new religious movements in the 1990s, later interpreted as a perfect example of the moral panic (Goldberger et al. 2010). Some scholars highlighted the fundamental misrepresentation of these movements in the press (e.g. Ibek 1996; Doktor 2002), and in books published by Catholic publishing houses (Możdżyński 2002). However, their examination was basically devoid of any solid discourse—related theoretical grounding.

Stella Grotowska (2009) was probably the first to present the tenets of the discourse analysis and use it to comment on press publications. She drew on perspectives elaborated by Foucault, van Dijk, and Laclau and Mouffe, and offered a detailed analysis of how, in the Polish opinion-leading press, the representations of Radio Maryja, a medium promoting Roman Catholic integralism, are entangled in struggles over political power and serve as a point of reference for the articulation of symbolic elites. Grotowska's publication has not, however, changed the dominant approach to studying the media representations of and produced by religious actors, as Polish sociologists of religion still tend to present these issues descriptively. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that on the margins of this “mainstream,” a few scholars have recently published analyses engaging with discourse theories in depth. For instance, Dorota Hall (2016) drew on the works by Laclau and Mouffe and press materials from the last thirty years to examine the possibilities of articulation by Polish LGBT Christians. Anna Szwed (2019) used van Leeuwen's perspective on discursive construction of legitimation to discuss types of legitimation in utterances of RCC hierarchs on gender and reproductive rights, and Katarzyna Zielińska (2019) discussed the directions for further sociological research combining discourse analyses with studies on religion in the public sphere.

In the context of the pandemic and the lines of inquiry mentioned above, the advantage of these publications is that they pave the way for a careful examination of the dynamics of power that engage religious actors and discourses they produce. Their disadvantage is that they do not take seriously the typology of the media through which discourses are communicated, i.e. they do not reflect on the possibilities, limitations and uncertainties related to the use of specific media. It is only in Szwed and Zielińska (2017) where one can find a comment pertaining to this issue: the authors acknowledge that when speaking about gender, RCC officials adjust their argumentative strategies to the media profile (religious vs secular) through which they communicate their message. Still, the focus on discourses and representations did not allow authors to take into account the intricacies of communicating the message via different communication tools—in the press, on the radio, television, or online. Neither did it allow for presenting the perspective of producers or recipients of the message.

The second current of sociological studies on religion and the media in Poland is concerned primarily with the materiality of the media. At the same time, when it comes to the issues related to mediatization, it follows a descriptive mode of presentation instead of elaborating on the theory. Here, we can find a number of works that focus on the media production of the Churches (mainly the RCC) and its reception, both presented in quantitative terms; many of these publications refer to the increased use of the internet by the clergy

and believers, and the challenges it poses (e.g. Kloch 2011, 2013; Guzek 2015; Stachowska 2016). The general idea that drives these academic endeavors is that the RCC needs to adapt to the changing media environment and dominant modes of communication.

Works based on qualitative research, less common in Poland, lean towards the cultural studies approach and emphasize the online presence of traditionally performed religious and religion-related practices (Siuda 2010), in some cases with a specific focus on prayer (Sierocki 2006), pilgrimage (Marciniak 2008) or creating virtual cemeteries (Kubiak 2010). The authors point to the increased pastoral and proselytizing online activity of Churches and religious groups of varying legal status (Siuda 2010), and/or present the internet as a space where new forms of spirituality have excellent conditions to thrive (Siuda 2010; Zduniak 2016). These works typically take a bird's-eye view on the presence of religion on the internet and are concerned mainly with mapping the online religious territory.

Two publications stand out of this picture. Marta Kołodziejska (2018) scrutinized discussions conducted on Polish Catholic online forums with a view to identify negotiation-based processes of community building and establishing authority structures in times of increased religious individualization and mediatization. Radosław Sierocki (2018) in turn discussed the issue of practicing religion on Facebook. He took a user-centric approach by drawing conclusions from in-depth interviews with Roman Catholic Facebook users engaged in disseminating their religious perspective. Both authors situated their discussion within the theoretical framework of mediatization theories, and both were cognizant of the issue of negotiating religious worldviews in online spaces. With that being said, although they pointed to particular power games performed online, they resigned from commenting on the shared meanings and broad discursive structures (and related power relations) in which the analyzed practices are entangled.

In sum, while the first current of sociological research on religion and the media in Poland enables a careful examination of discursive practices which shape power relations involving religion, it does not allow us to discuss complexities of the discursive production that depend upon the use of specific media. While the second current of research is oriented towards the media, and sometimes provides a glimpse into the perspective of media users, as a rule it does not thoroughly engage with the dynamics of power involving religious discourses and identities. We believe that these two currents may be combined in a way mitigating their respective shortcomings. To prepare the ground for presenting how this may be achieved, we first systematize the theoretical perspectives on mediatization.

### **Three Approaches to Mediatization**

In the field of research on religion and the media in Poland there has been little debate regarding the understanding of media and mediatization itself and the relevant methodological approaches. From the point of view of the recent pandemic-related developments, these concepts should be addressed, as they have not only theoretical, but also methodological implications.

As we have already demonstrated, the discursive approach is not concerned with going deeper into theoretical perspectives on the media and mediatization. As a rule, the second

current of research we have identified does not engage with mediatization theories either. However, the majority of studies that pertain to this current do draw, albeit implicitly, on a specific concept of mediatization. Namely, they understand mediatization in the institutional sense, i.e. as a social process “spurred by both the development of the media and the dynamics of a variety of other institutions in which social agents try to make use of the media’s resources for their own purposes” (Hjarvard 2014: 223). From this perspective, the media are considered a semi-independent institution, which participate in the transformation process within and between other institutional fields. As such, the media can also be considered actors with their own interests and means to influence other institutional entities.

The focus of Stig Hjarvard’s concept of mediatization of religion is on how religious institutions adapt and increasingly rely on “media logic,” which is “the institutional, aesthetic and technological *modus operandi* of the media” (Hjarvard 2011: 123). Typically, researchers deploying the institutional concept of mediatization analyze the modes of presence of Churches in the media (in Poland: researchers using quantitative approach and Guzek 2015, 2019), or the transmission of meaning from Church to secular media discourses (Ostwalt 2012; Pärna 2010). In all cases, the “use” of media may be mentioned, but it is investigated as a reflection of the goals of the religious institution, as well as the strategies deployed to attain them. While this perspective will shed light on how the institutions or their segments operate, it typically does not offer a deeper insight into the perspectives of the users (understood as individual actors): content producers, recipients, or into the processes of meaning-making. Some exceptions worth mentioning include Mia Lövheim’s studies on young people’s religious identity (2004), and female bloggers (2011), however, Polish works done within the institutional framework do not include such investigations.

Another approach to mediatization, the material one, focuses on the material properties of technology, which “both shapes and is shaped by social and cultural processes” (Hepp, Hjarvard and Lundby 2015: 317). In times of the prevalence of digital media, this perspective helps understand how technology (defined broadly as devices, machines, codes, services, etc.) changes cultural practices, contributes to the transformation of meaning (especially of space, time, relationships), and how through technologies those cultural practices materialize (Lundby 2014). Studies deploying this approach include research on religious apps (Hutchings 2014), religious discourses in gaming (Radde-Antweiler 2015; Schaap and Aupers 2017), the adaptation of devices within religious communities (such as the “kosher phone,” cf. Campbell 2010), or on the analysis of hypermediation of religious spaces (Evolvi 2018). This perspective is particularly useful in analyzing the affordances of digital media, and it does consider the institutional perspective to a limited degree, focusing primarily on the function of technology in social processes. In Poland, this approach was prominent in the work of Sierocki (2018).

A third approach can be considered social-constructivist or cultural. Its goal is to “investigate the interrelation between the change of media communication and sociocultural change as part of everyday communication practices, and how the change of these practices is related to a changing communicative construction of reality” (Hepp 2013: 618; cf. Couldry and Hepp 2013). In this approach, mediatization is considered a non-linear metaprocess, much like individualization or globalization, and should be analyzed in connection to a certain segment or phenomenon, like mediatization of sport events or reli-



gious discourse. For Andreas Hepp, mediatization has a quantitative and qualitative dimension: the former refers to increasing amount of “social relationships and institutions that are characterized by technologically mediated communication” (Hepp 2013: 53), and the latter points to the fact that media transform how we communicate, and that the way we communicate reflects the changes in the media (Hepp 2015). In this context, it is apparent that adapting the social-constructivist approach entails deploying methodological apparatus which can adequately investigate the transformations of communication, also from the perspective of collective and individual actors. This third approach to studying mediatization underpins our research project deploying the Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse (SKAD) framework.

### **Religion and the Media: Example of a Project**

The key question we ask in our study of the Seventh-Day Adventists and Orthodox Christians in Poland and the UK is how the minority Christian Churches construct their identity in two different environments through their media. To answer the question, we have analyzed official magazines (two per Church per country, eight journals in total) and websites (one or two websites per Church per country, seven websites in total) from June 2016 to December 2017. To complete the study with the users’ perspective, we have conducted episodic interviews with Church media producers (Flick 1997). We have interviewed eight persons per Church and per country, in two rounds with a one-year interval (2019 and 2020), totaling in 64 interviews. The interviewees included media departments’ directors, editors, independent creators, and technical staff. The transcribed interviews and media material were then analyzed with the use of the SKAD framework.

We have chosen SKAD as the most appropriate analytical framework because it enabled us to reconstruct the process of discursive identity construction within the Orthodox and Adventist Churches (for a detailed overview of the method see Keller 2013). The focal point of SKAD is the processes (and social effects) of social construction, objectivization, communication and legitimization of meaning structures by organizations, institutions, and collective social actors (Keller 2013: 61). The production and circulation of knowledge is analyzed at the levels of institutional fields, but through the lens of how the actors orientate themselves in their discursive practices, and how they abide by, defy, or transform the rules of their fields. The historical-social, institutional, and situative contexts are investigated as well, since they both influence the positions of the actors and the knowledge construction and are influenced by them. In the case of our study, the contexts in which the Adventist and Orthodox Churches operate in Poland and the UK have played a significant role not only in the positioning of these minority Churches, but also on their media production. The media themselves were an important segment of the context: media ensembles (i.e. range, types of media used by the Churches) and media materiality have an impact on what type of content is produced and whom it can reach, therefore they had to be included in the investigation.

The inclusion of episodic interviews enabled us to investigate the two levels of knowledge construction in the context of religious identity: how it is constructed in relation to the official Church narrative and/or dominant discourses in Poland and the UK, and how

it manifests itself in concrete situations, in relation to specific topics, activities, or events. This way, we got a broad image not only of the media production itself, but also on how various contexts shape the identity narratives.

One of the key premises was that the narratives found in the media content and the interviews are the elements of larger narrative segments which can be identified as “Adventist media discourse” or “Orthodox media discourse” in Poland and the UK. This does not mean, however, that we assumed synchronization, consistency, or ideal similarity between these elements. In fact, we investigated the points of contention, incongruences, discursive oppositions, and overlaps. Interviewing people responsible for producing media content, both officially, in the Church mainstream, and independently, made us cognizant not only of what the areas of incongruences and consistency are, but also of their connections with the power relations pertaining to Churches’ media institutional structure. This way, we got a more comprehensive view of the Church narratives and the inherent identity construction processes.

Let us now discuss the combination of the user-centric perspective with discourse analysis in the context of how the structures of media production, and media materiality translate into the type of content which is produced. The analysis of the official British Adventist magazines (*The Messenger* and *Encounter*, the latter addressed to Adventist youth) has shown that the main type of produced content is a form of informative reporting on the Church events, presenting the Church and its members in best light, without engaging in any critical discussions on the Church’s authorities. The content is addressed to Adventist churchgoers, and it emphasizes the unity of the Church. The Polish Adventist magazines show more variety. *Znaki Czasu* is addressed to non-Adventists and Adventists alike, which also influences the type of content it publishes: more explanatory, educational, informing the public about Adventism and its Protestant roots, and highlighting the theological and structural differences between the Adventist Church and the RCC, which is a form of differentiation from the majority Church and legitimizing the Adventist identity. The other major Adventist journal, *Głos Adwentu*, is addressed to pastors, ministers, and Church staff, as well as lay Adventists interested in the theological discussions within the Church and its organization. Despite those differences, all of the magazines operate in a traditional content producer-recipient structure, in which recipients’ responses are limited to sending letters to the editors.

The interviews with content creators allowed us to investigate the content production on the conceptual level. The interviewees were aware that various media types require different approaches and content (as well as its presentation). Discussing the preparation of a 10-minute show on the Polish public radio, one interviewee pointed out:

*Those ten minutes cannot be treated like a slot we need to fill. (...) We use this time to show that we can be part of the Polish Radio, to talk to competent people, to present stories or matters that concern all listeners, thirty-eight million people, not just the specific environments.*

This quote illustrates that the media producers adjust what they want to present and how to the media context: on public radio, it is more important to show the relevance of Adventist message indirectly, or emphasize Adventist presence in Poland, rather than discuss theological issues or points of dispute with the RCC.

Media awareness also pertained to the situation during the pandemic. In an interview done in spring 2020, a Polish media specialist commended Adventist digital media production for their versatility, and timely reactions to the rapidly changing situation:

*When we watch commercial stations, public television, we are a little bit tired of the words “coronavirus,” “COVID-19” and so on. Because in general talking about it adds nothing new. So, (...) at the beginning it was justified and we built a message of hope around the topic. (...) We continue the action, but now we profile [the media] a little bit differently. We are already entering the field of psychological assessment, talking with psychiatrists, with psychologists, we are perhaps preparing for the second wave of the pandemic, which will be a crisis.*

The segment shows that digital media, especially during the pandemic, are used as “rapid response” tools for conveying the message, which can also be adjusted to the changing needs with greater flexibility than more traditional media channels. In a magazine, the editorial board decides on the content of each issue, there are topic and content selection procedures, and it has to be planned in advance in order to meet the publishing deadlines. On YouTube, producing a 10-minute video with a pastor’s address to the public can be done much faster, and with fewer resources—and the flexibility of digital media is connected with a less hierarchical structure of production.

Including the producers’ perspective sheds some light on power relations within the media structures, which may not be found in the media content itself. One UK interviewee commenting on the Adventist media in the UK, said:

*So it always frustrates me that [UK Church] media, they’ll spend £50,000 or £100,000 to buy these expensive cameras, and what do they do with them? They film a sermon. I can film a sermon on my phone. You know, how good a quality camera do you need to be to film a static man standing behind a wooden pulpit speaking for an hour? (...) If you look at Adventist media, a lot of it is chat shows of three pastors talking. And maybe they’re trying to be relevant, “Let’s discuss crime or let’s discuss women’s issues,” or whatever. At the end, it’s boring.*

This comment puts the UK media material into the perspective of power relations: the distribution of resources to the official media channels funds certain type of projects and formats, while it neglects other, more independent ones, perhaps more innovative and challenging. Hence, incorporating the producers’ perspective has shown us that official Church media (Adventist, Orthodox, or any other) should not be seen as all-encompassing, and speakers on behalf of the Church as a whole (including all authorities and lay members), but rather vehicles for conveying a certain image of the Church, used to produce narratives which are in line with the aims of the Church’s structures and media departments. The content analysis can be used to find out what these narratives are. Furthermore, the combination of media material and user perspective enables us to analyze power relations on various levels: within the Church media (cognizant of the specificities of media types), between the Church and the state (and other Churches), on the level of discourse, and from a personal perspective.

## Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic, as a phenomenon of an unprecedented magnitude, opens up a wide space for new studies in all possible academic disciplines and sub-disciplines, including the sociology of religion. In Poland, the pandemic-related lockdown regulations

have exposed existing religious hierarchies and accelerated the mediatization of religious communication and practice. In our view, these effects of the pandemic are promising subjects of inquiry for the Polish sociology of religion now and in post-pandemic times.

When a multitude of social practices are shifting to digital spaces, it seems natural for researchers to turn to studies that have made the ground for reflecting on religion and the media. As we have demonstrated, in Poland, two currents of such studies may be discerned: 1) approaches using discourse analysis of media representations, and 2) approaches oriented towards the materiality of the media. The problem is, however, that these two currents function separately, which means the advantages of both have weak chances to inform each other.

As a way forward, we advocate for the employment of a social-constructivist approach to mediatization and the Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse (SKAD). In our view, this theoretical framework, when supplemented with episodic interviews at the methodological level, is a particularly useful toolkit to analyze media discourses *in actu*, with the focus on the construction of meaning and knowledge and, at the same time, without losing sight of power relations on the one hand, and the perspective of media users on the other.

When presenting this theoretical-methodological framework, we have referred to our ongoing project on Christian minorities and the media. We are fully aware that what we offer in this project is not the only possible way of how Polish sociologists of religion may respond to the changing landscapes of religion in times of deep mediatization (Hepp 2016), especially since we study the issue from one specific angle, i.e. from the perspective of producers of religious message, the majority of them being institutionally recognized by their respective Church organizations. Nevertheless, our approach may become a source of inspiration for research projects that go beyond our specific focus. With the use of SKAD and other user-centric frameworks, researchers can investigate how the official institutional discourse is disseminated and received, altered, re-constructed by both media producers and audiences (who are rarely just passive recipients in times of the rapid social media development). Furthermore, the framework may reveal how the media functions for and within an institution or organization, and also how it affects the way Churches create their message for different audiences in the context of discursively shaped power relations that organize the social imagery and practice. In times of the intensified media use in the pandemic, the researchers can also observe the changing matrix of communication that hinges upon the use of particular communication devices, services and protocols, from the perspectives of media producers and consumers alike.

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#### *Biographical Notes:*

Dorota Hall, Ph.D., Associate Professor at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences, and President of the International Study of Religion in Eastern and Central Europe Association (ISORE-CEA), is a cultural anthropologist and sociologist. Her research interests focus on religion, gender and sexualities. In the field of sociology of religion she sides with theoretical perspectives that do justice to the entanglement of religion in a variety of power relations. She has published articles in international journals and authored a book *Searching for a Place: LGBT Christians in Poland* (2016, in Polish).

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6708-6695>

E-mail: [dhall@ifispan.edu.pl](mailto:dhall@ifispan.edu.pl)

Marta Kołodziejska, Ph.D., is a sociologist of religion, currently working at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences. Her main research focus is on the relationship between the media and religious community, identity, authority, as well as spirituality. In her recent book, *Online Catholic Communi-*

*ties: community, authority and religious individualisation*, published in 2018 by Routledge, she investigated how religious authority is constructed on Polish Roman Catholic internet forums.

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6868-3050>

E-mail: [ma.kolodziejska@gmail.com](mailto:ma.kolodziejska@gmail.com)