Mediatization of Religion in Kyrgyzstan: Diffusion of Religious Authority and Changing Perceptions of Religion

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Nurbek Bekmurzaev
Geneva Centre of Security Policy
nurbek0124@gmail.com

Abstract

This article explores the media's role in facilitating religious change in Kyrgyzstan. Taking Stig Hjarvard's theory of mediatization as its point of departure, it goes on to examine how his thesis works when applied to the case of Islam in Kyrgyzstan. It argues that the media facilitates religious transformation in Kyrgyzstan by redefining the power constellation between various religious actors and bridging the gap between ethnic and religious identities, mainly through language. By reinforcing people's religious identities, the media creates more intricate ways for Kyrgyzstan's Muslims to relate to each other.

Keywords

mediatization – Kyrgyzstan – religion – perceptions – social change

Introduction

This article explores the interplay between the media, religion, and social change in Kyrgyzstan. It takes as its point of departure the mediatization theory proposed by Danish sociologist Stig Hjarvard. Hjarvard argues that the media have emerged as an important source of information about religious issues, and religious experiences and beliefs have come to be molded by the demands of popular media genres.[1] He further argues that the media has emerged "as an

1 Stig Hjarvard, "The Mediatisation of Religion: Theorising Religion, Media and Social Change," *Culture and Religion* 12, no. 2 (2011): 119–35, 119.

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independent institution with a logic of its own that other social institutions have to accommodate to" and that media is "an integral part of other social institutions like politics, work, family, and religion as more and more of these institutional activities are performed both through interactive and mass media."2 As highlighted by Hjarvard, "contemporary society is permeated by the media, to the extent that the media may no longer be conceived of as being separate from cultural and social institutions."3

Media and religion in Kyrgyzstan have experienced considerable transformations in recent years, both as institutions developing on their own and as integrated entities. Islam has reached new heights in terms of its societal importance. As such, it is worth exploring its development through mediatization theory. A quarter-century after the collapse of the Soviet Union and, consequently, the end of the atheist regime, religion in Kyrgyzstan has returned to the public space and become an integral part of society. As a result of different factors enabling the development of religion—often referred to as a process of re-Islamization—Muslims in Kyrgyzstan have rediscovered their religious identity, which is today manifested in numerous ways.

Religion's increasing interconnectedness with other institutions and return to the public sphere is evidenced, for instance, by the recent standoff between a famous cleric and parliamentary deputies over the issue of longer lunch breaks on Fridays. Tazabek Ikramov, a member of parliament, proposed legislation extending the Friday lunch break for government employees, increasing it to two hours, so that they would have enough time to attend Friday prayers. After this initiative was voted down within the small review committee (by six votes to three), thus denying an opportunity to reach the Jogorku Kenesh for the general parliamentary vote, Chubak ajy Zhalilov, Kyrgyzstan's former mufti and one of the most influential clerics in the country, expressed his frustration.4 In a seven-minute-long video rant released by Nasaat Media following the tabulation of votes, Chubak ajy said that he would not greet, sit at the same table with, or participate in the burial ceremonies of deputies who did not support the proposed law. He added that he would never vote for them again in any election and called on the public to follow suit in boycotting these

2 Hjarvard, "The Mediatisation of Society," 113.3

Ibid., 105.

4 Nazgul Begalieva, "Kadyr Malikov prizval eks-muftiia i Zhanara Akayeva k primireniiu," *Vb.kg*., June 9, 2016, accessed June 9, 2016, http://www.vb.kg/doc/341380_kadyr_malikov_prizval_eks_myftiia_i_janara_akaeva_k_primireniu.html.

allegedly hypocritical Muslim deputies.5 Chubak ajy concluded his address by listing the names of all six deputies who voted against the proposal and suggesting that the Muftiiat create a database of hypocritical Muslims who pose a threat to the Kyrgyzstani *umma* from within.

The event produced an immediate reaction from the state: Chubak ajy was issued a warning from the State Committee on National Security (GKNB), while deputies were quick to label his statement as extremist and an example of religious leaders meddling with politics.6 Ordinary citizens took to social media to express their support for one side or the other by posting photos of either Chubak ajy or Zhanar Akayev, a deputy who voted and publicly spoke out against the law. Chubak ajy was temporarily banned from appearing in the media, a move that only caused his followers to rally more strenuously behind him.7 The conflict culminated in a meeting organized and hosted by then- President Almazbek Atambayev and attended by the current Mufti, Maksatbek ajy Toktomushev; Abdushukur ajy Narmatov, Head of the Council of *Ulama*; deputy Zhanar Akayev; Aliya Suranova, a journalist and famous blogger; and Nurlan Ismailov, an expert on religious issues.8 Atambayev reminded everyone present that Kyrgyzstan was a secular country where everyone's religious beliefs were respected and called for participants in the debate to abstain from extremism.

The above-mentioned story is illustrative of the changes taking place in Kyrgyzstani society. First and foremost, it shows that religion has become an important element of the social fabric, capable of stirring public debate across the country. This was the first time that a conflict between a cleric and politician mobilized people on such a vast scale that the president himself felt it was necessary to intervene and try to defuse the conflict. Secondly, it sheds light on the fact that there are multiple definitions of religion among the Kyrgyz people and that being religious or non-religious is a vague and ever-changing concept. This article thus seeks to explore the role of the media in facilitating these perception changes. The attempts of both sides to make their opposing cases

5 Anna Shabaldina, "V Kyrgyzstane razgorelsia skandal s uchastiem eks-muftiia i deputatov," *The Open Asia*, June 8, 2016, accessed August 15, 2016, http://theopenasia.net/articles/ detail/v-kyrgyzstane-razgorelsya-skandal-s-uchastiem-eks-muftiya-i-deputatov/.

6 Begalieva, "Kadyr Malikov."

7 A. Belekov, "Kak Chubak ajy prevratilsia v zakliatogo vraga vlasti?" *Gezzitter.org*, July 13, 2016, accessed August 15, 2016, http://www.gezitter.org/politic/51830_kak_chubak_ajyi_prevratilsya_v_zaklyatogo_vraga_vlasti/.

8 Saikal Toktogulova, "Atambayev podderzhal storonnikov svetskosti v spore s eks-muftiem," *Kloop.kg*, June 10, 2016, accessed August 15, 2016, http://kloop.kg/blog/2016/06/10/atambaev-podderzhal-storonnikov-svetskosti-v-spore-s-eks-muftiem/.

while holding Islam as their faith serve to show that being Muslim has an amorphous meaning that varies by societal group. The role of media in mediating this conflict hints at the effect media—as an institution—has on other social institutions, such as religion. This article also picks up that final point, arguing that through the integration of media into the institution of religion, the former is playing a major role in the transformation of the latter.

While the article adopts the mediatization theory as a premise for the study, it does not fully agree with Hjarvard's conclusions, such as his argument that mediatization of religion eventually leads to secularization through the circulation of religious elements and icons in popular media and the multiplication of life-worlds that challenge religion's authority to define and legitimate social reality.9 I agree with Hjarvard's critics who state that we should not take his theory at face value, and argue that the thesis in its current form is not fully applicable to the case of Kyrgyzstan—not only because his findings are limited to the specific context of the Scandinavian countries, but also because the theory overreaches in its attempt "to address not only the processes of institutional change in society, but also makes [mostly ungrounded and] general proposals concerning broader social and cultural consequences of these processes."10

Thus, from a theoretical perspective, this article joins Lovheim, Setianto, Clark, Waisbord, and Lynch11 in selectively praising Hjarvard's pioneering findings in the field while criticizing the theory, which does not account for local political and socio-cultural contexts and ignores the agency of independent religious actors as well as broader processes shaping both mediatization and religion. Hjarvard has adopted a rather precarious and narrow theoretical framework that defines religion primarily using cognitive anthropology theories. On the contrary, I argue that mediatization of religion in Kyrgyzstan is a process through which media and religion interact to produce multiple changes for

9 Hjarvard, "The Mediatisation of Society."

10 Nick Couldry, "Digital Storytelling, Media Research and Democracy: Conceptual Choices and Alternative Futures," in *Digital Storytelling, Mediatized Stories: Self-Representations in New Media*, ed. Knut Lundby (New York: Peter Lang, 2008): 41–60, 43–4.

11 Mia Lovheim, "Mediatisation of Religion: A Critical Appraisal," *Culture and Religion* 12, no. 2 (2011): 153–66; Yearry Panji Setianto, "Mediatization of Religion: How the Indonesian Muslim Diasporas Mediatized Islamic Practices," *Journal of Media and Religion* 14 (2015): 230–44; Lynn Schofield Clark, "Considering Religion and Mediatisation through a Case Study of J+K's Big Day (The J K Wedding Entrance Dance): A Response to Stig Hjarvard," *Culture and Religion* 12, no. 2 (2011): 167–84; Silvio Waisbord, "A Metatheory of Mediatiza- tion and Globalization?" *Journal of Multicultural Discourses* 8, no. 3 (2013): 182–89; Gordon Lynch, "What Can We Learn from the Mediatisation of Religion Debate?" *Culture and Religion* 12, no. 2 (2011): 203–10.

Kyrgyzstani Muslims. The consequences of this process include redistribution of religious authority and changing societal perceptions of religion.

The current state of the political economy of knowledge production on Central Asia has driven many scholars to focus on epistemically violent and politically provocative topics, such as religious radicalism and terrorism. This has left a gap in the field of sociological and cultural studies of religion in Kyrgyzstan. This article attempts to partially fill that gap while contributing to the broader scholarship on mediatization theory. Thus, the selection of media outlets was designed to make an introductory, empirically grounded, and specific contribution on the interplay between media and religion in Kyrgyzstan. This article is based on field research conducted in Bishkek in August 2016. In order to understand how mediatization of religion unfolds and brings changes in Kyrgyzstan, I interviewed personnel from five different media outlets that, in one way or another, communicate religious information to people. The decision to explore changes in religion through media outlets instead of through Muslims themselves (who are usually the subject of change) was made in order to investigate how the media—as a change-mediating institution—present religion, rather than its popular reception, which the funding and time constraints on this research did not quite allow for.

Conceptualizing Mediatization and Religion

Mediatization Theory as Advanced by Stig Hjarvard

Before engaging in a detailed discussion of Hjarvard's mediatization theory, it is reasonable to look at how scholars thought to make sense of media's growing influence on society. The term "mediatization" was first applied to politics and communication in the work of Swedish media researcher Kent Asp, who defined it as a process whereby "a political system to a high degree is influenced and adjusted to the demands of the mass media in their coverage of politics."12 An example of mediatized politics is when politicians frame their statements in provocative and polarizing ways so as to receive more media coverage and attention. According to Mazzoleni and Schulz, "mediatized politics is politics that has lost its autonomy, has become dependent in its central functions on mass media, and is continuously shaped by interactions with mass media."13 Asp borrowed Norwegian sociologist Gudmund Hernes'

12 Quoted in Hjarvard, "The Mediatisation of Society," 106.

13 Gianpietro Mazzoleni and Winfried Schulz, "Mediatization of Politics: A Challenge for Democracy?" *Political Communication* 16 (1999): 247–61, 249.

concept of "media-twisted society."14 His primary argument was that media "had a fundamental impact on all social institutions and their relation to one another."15 Hernes was one of the first scholars to observe media's growing in- fluence at the institutional level, and many of his arguments resonate in the works of Hjarvard.

Although Hjarvard's theory of mediatization of religion has been the subject of significant criticism from other scholars working on the sociology of religion, he deserves credit for his thesis, which was not only one of the first attempts to explain the role of media in modern society, but also stirred productive debate that advanced research in the field. Hjarvard believes that "for contemporary sociological inquiry into late-modernity society, a theory of the importance of the media for culture and society is no longer an interesting prospect, but an absolute necessity."16 The principal argument advanced by his theory is that mediatization is a double-sided process. First, the media have developed into a more autonomous institution in society, and second, the media have become integrated into the workings of other social institutions.17 Hjarvard sees the independence of media as an institution and its widespread influence, coupled with the fact that it has acquired its own logic, as a paradigm-shifting development in society. He grounds his theory in the argument that the media have broken the shackles of other social institutions, such as politics and religion, which until recently used the media to serve their own needs and agenda. Having acquired institutional independence and leverage, the media have now subjugated other social institutions to their own logic, which Hjarvard defines as the "institutional and technological modus operandi of the media, including the ways in which media distribute material and symbolic resources and make use of formal and informal rules."18 The mediatization theory presents the transformation and increased importance of media as being so compel- ling that other social institutions have to follow its logic in order to cope with modernity and maintain their relevance in society. Mediatization is seen as a meta-process on a par with urbanization and globalization.19 An important side-note stressed by Hjarvard is that mediatization is distinct from mediation; the latter process "refers to communication via the medium"20 and "a single

14 Quoted in Hjarvard, "The Mediatisation of Society," 106.
15 Hjarvard, "The Mediatisation of Society," 106.
16 Ibid., 129.
17 Hjarvard, "The Mediatisation of Religion," 122
18 Hjarvard, "The Mediatisation of Society," 113.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid., 114.

instance of using one medium or another will not necessarily have any notable effect on religion as an institution."21 Mediatization involves a long-term process whereby the media have become an independent and powerful institution that brings changes to other institutions by subjugating these institutions to its own logic.

The second part of the mediatization theory involves Hjarvard's observations of how media's increased role in the sphere of religion affects religion's place in society. He argues that the mediatization of religion leads to the secularization of society.22 Given the omnipresence of the media, they come to substitute for religious institutions, since "as a cultural and social environment, the media have taken over many of the cultural and social functions of the institutionalized religions and provide spiritual guidance, moral orientation, ritual passages and a sense of community and belonging."23 The role of media in the provision of moral guidance and orientation is particularly acute in the Scandinavian context, which is the region on which mediatization theory is based. Hjarvard provides an account of this socio-cultural context, describing "weak" religion "characterized by a lesser degree of commitment to religious organizations and a higher degree of individual belief."24 In this, he follows what Grace Davie termed "believing without belonging" or "belonging without believing": the Scandinavian phenomenon of widespread church membership as a tradition that has little or no effect on beliefs or behavior.25 The mediatization of religion has pushed people from conventional practices and experiences to new ways of learning, experiencing, and living their religions. The term "weak" religion is crucial to understanding Hjarvard's argument linking the mediatization and secularization of society. In an environment where the majority of people do not seem to have any special emotional attachment to their faith or religious institutions, the media becomes an importance source of information "about religious issues, and religious information and experiences become molded according to the demands of popular media genres."26 According to Hjarvard, it is people's relative indifference to how the media uses religious icons and signs that leads to secularization.

The theory's line of argument eventually leads Hjarvard to conclude that the media has produced and communicated "banal" religion, which challenges

21 Hjarvard, "The Mediatisation of Religion," 124.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., 119.
24 Ibid., 120.
25 Grace Davie, *The Sociology of Religion* (London: Sage Publications, 2007).
26 Hjarvard, "The Mediatisation of Religion," 119.

institutionalized religion's authority over legitimate social reality by creating a plurality of life-worlds. Hjarvard defines the concept of "banal" religion as a media-generated phenomenon consisting of "elements taken from institutionalized religions, such as crosses, prayers, and cowls as well as elements usually associated with folk religions, such as trolls, vampires, and black cats crossing the street."27 It is banal in the sense that it does not provide a complex proposition about the metaphysical order or the meaning of life, and "it is a religion in the sense that it evokes cognitions, emotions or actions that imply the existence of supernatural agency."28 In order to better grasp Hjarvard's arguments in relation to banal religion and secularization, it is necessary to examine his conceptualization of religion and secularization.

Hjarvard adopts a definition of religion rooted in the theories of cognitive anthropology, and this is manifested in his work on the mediatization of religion, wherein he defines religion as "human actions, beliefs and symbols related to supernatural agencies."29 For Hjarvard, religion is mostly about humans' "ability to imagine a metaphysical world and to understand inexplicable occurrences in the human world through ascribing intention and agency to powers beyond natural phenomena."30 In his definition of secularization, Hjarvard leans on the works of Peter Berger, who defines it as a "process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols" and "implies that the maintenance of a religiously defined world is eroding."31 Once we understand that Hjarvard sees religion as a phenomenon that defines social reality—and conceptualizes secularization mainly as a process that undermines religion's authority to legitimate social reality—it is not difficult to follow his argument on the interplay between the mediatization of religion and secularization. Banal religion might not constitute a highly structured proposition of the metaphysical order, but it still contributes to the pluralization of life-worlds by incorporating religious symbols and elements into popular media genres. Through the communication of banal religion, the media "facilitate the very multiplication of life worlds that challenge religion's authority to define the social world" and thus "mediatization of religion primarily tends to be intertwined with the process of

27 Ibid., 128.

28 Ibid.

29 Quoted in Lovheim, "Mediatisation of Religion," 154.

30 Lovheim, "Mediatisation of Religion," 153.

31 Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1967), 107.

secularization."32 This article adopts an approach that combines criticism with appraisal and argues in favor of broadening conceptualizations of religion and accounting for local context, especially when conducting empirical studies.

Critical Appraisal of Mediatization Theory

The first and foremost reason for adopting a critical attitude toward Hjarvard's thesis in its current form is his decision to ground his arguments in a specific— and rather limited—geographical, political and social context. His conclusions follow from observations made in the Scandinavian countries of Norway, Sweden and Denmark. I argue here and in the paragraphs to follow that we should not take the mediatization theory at face value and should distance ourselves from any generalizations. This article adopts the view that "mediatization, by its very definition, is always bound in time and to cultural context."33 Thus, it is important to separate Hjarvard's arguments from the context in which they are based and look at mediatization theory as a tool for exploring the transformation of religion in its interplay with the media in modern societies.34 Hjarvard himself admits that the mediatization of religion should not be seen as a universal process and that its consequences vary depending on the particular religious and media context.35 In formulating its arguments, however, the theory does not consider the unique context created by strong and institutionalized religions, such as Islam in Kyrgyzstan, which is characterized by the lack of a single institution where religion has strong, concentrated authority and by ever-increasing commitment on the part of its followers. Furthermore, it is fair to say that religion in the Scandinavian context has been confined to the private sphere; in Kyrgyzstan, by contrast, religion has been on the rise in terms of membership and its role in society, and seeks to strengthen its place in public space and its ability to push a policy agenda. Lynch advances a similar argument, stating that Hjarvard's thesis is useful only under a particular set of conditions: "it is not a framework for a more general theory of media, religion and society in late modernity."36

Religious context is not the only difference between the Scandinavian countries and Kyrgyzstan. The media and political context also derail any attempts to extend Hjarvard's arguments beyond the Scandinavian region. Kyrgyzstan's

32 Hjarvard, "The Mediatisation of Religion," 130.

33 Quoted in Hjarvard, "The Mediatisation of Society," 109.

34 Mia Lovheim and Gordon Lynch, "The Mediatisation of Religion Debate: An Introduction," *Culture and Religion* 12, no. 2 (2011): 111–17.

35 Hjarvard, "The Mediatisation of Religion."

36 Ibid., 206.

political context is rooted in the Soviet tradition of controlling religion and media. Although independent and allegedly democratic for more than a quarter-century, the after-effects of the highly intrusive and manipulative Soviet totalitarian regime continue to be felt. The banning of Chubak ajy from all media after he took a stand against members of the parliament and challenged a state decision exemplifies the Kyrgyzstani government's efforts to control both religion and media. This is hardly the case in the Scandinavian countries, where the state interferes little in the workings of these two institutions.

Turning to the media system in Scandinavia and Kyrgyzstan, Gordon Lynch—who sought to identify the main context differences—has outlined four specificities of Hjarvard's theory.37 None of the factors mentioned are present in Kyrgyzstan. For example, Lynch suggests that in order for the mediatization theory to be applicable to other places and societies, there needs to be "little direct engagement with religious institutions or structures" and "more general evidence of secularization at societal, organizational and individual levels."38 In Kyrgyzstan, by contrast, people's engagement with religion through media is a supplemental form of engagement with their faith; they also attend the mosque and engage directly in other ways. The recent standoff between the religious part of the population and those who identify themselves as secular citizens hints at society's re-traditionalization and Islamization. This is not to say that people in Kyrgyzstan are all devout Muslims or to suggest that processes of secularization are absent; however, it is sufficient to conclude that secularization is not the only dominant process shaping Kyrgyzstani society. In this, I follow scholars who argue that there is no proof that growing mediatization leads to similar outcomes everywhere. This article seeks to "produce nuanced explanations for why and when mediatization leads to both similar and different outcomes—what factors mitigate or facilitate its encroachment in social life."39

Furthermore, Hjarvard presents media as the ultimate institution, one that intervenes in the workings of other institutions at will and operates independently of other global meta-processes. There is no hint that religious actors have agency, nor that the media might be "contributing towards social change that is already underway as enacted collectively" and "facilitating cultural production that, in turn, contributes to, extends and intensifies such existing social trends."40 The current formulation of the theory gives the impression that

37 Lynch, "What Can We Learn?"

38 Hjarvard, "The Mediatisation of Religion," 205.

39 Waisbord, "A Metatheory of Mediatization," 188.

40 Clark, "Considering Religion," 176.

changes within religion are bound to—and dictated by—interactions with the media, and that religion is a static institution incapable of transformation from within. Couldry has voiced similar criticism of the theory's overtly linear and evolutionistic understanding of social change,41 while Lovheim has condemned a "media deterministic view where the media as an external force invades other social institutions."42 Lovheim also calls for an expanded under- standing of religion "that better acknowledges the agency of religious actors to take part in shaping media as well as modern society."43 Religion transforms only when "various constellations of factors come together rather than when a set of stakeholders seek to mold cultural artifacts to the ends they seek."44

Moreover, Hjarvard seems to disregard the fact that religion and the media do not exist in a social and cultural vacuum; both institutions fall under the influence of such processes as globalization. Religion in Kyrgyzstan is influenced by numerous factors, ranging from state policies and foreign missionaries to existing demographic divisions in society. Media is just one actor, and it is hard to say whether it is the most influential. These critical insights call to rethink the media's role in religious transformations. I argue that, in Kyrgyzstan, media facilitate and intensify religious transformations; rather than changing religion's content, the media "[give] shape to our perceptions of what religion is and how we think and talk about it."45 Those changing perceptions affect how Muslims in Kyrgyzstan think about not only religion, but also their identities and roles in the Kyrgyzstani *umma*.

Last but not least, this article argues in favor of adopting an expanded understanding of religion, rather than the one used by Hjarvard. His definition of religion, which emphasizes only beliefs, imagination, and explanation, "make[s] religion a largely cognitive phenomenon, having to do with the construction and the maintenance of a particular worldview."46 The theory's focus on the cognitive aspect does not do justice to the vast array of social and cultural functions religion carries out. More importantly, this kind of systematic and cognitive conceptualization of religion is rather artificial, for it "often reflects an implicit ideal of the religious individual, 'homo religious', modeled

41 Couldry, "Digital Storytelling."
42 Lovheim, "Mediatisation of Religion," 159.
43 Hjarvard, "The Mediatisation of Religion," 159.
44 Clark, "Considering Religion," 170.
45 Ibid., 180.
46 Lovheim, "Mediatisation of Religion," 154.

on religious elites rather than the majority of adherents."47 For the majority of adherents, religion has rarely been solely about the ability to assign meaning to supernatural phenomena; it serves to provide identities both to people and their family and friends, draws gender and age lines regarding the distribution of labor and authority, and contributes to the general framework of social dynamics. Moreover, religion is "concerned with connecting the human and the transcendent and with the organization of social relations relating to the transcendent or 'binding' and 'bonding' believers with each other."48 The idea of incorporating other dimensions of religion, such as social relations and communication, into the study of the mediatization of religion implies that instead of studying how the media changes religion, this article explores how religion transforms "in the modern world in interaction with the media."49

The Transformation of Religion in Interaction with the Media in Kyrgyzstan

The empirical part of the article is based on the study of five media outlets representing various media, including a newspaper, a magazine, a mobile app, and radio and tv stations. Two of them, *Maral fm* and *Ayan tv*, differ from the rest in that they are not exclusively religious media, but rather have shows about religion that air once a week. The three others are an Islamic magazine called *Umma*; a mobile app, *Hidayat*; and a newspaper published by the Islamic University of Kyrgyzstan, *Beyish*. These media outlets provide only religious content, and their main goal is to spread religious knowledge at a national level.

Further study of the religious materials communicated by secular media through their weekly shows demonstrated that there was virtually no difference between religious and secular media when it came to the content. In contrast to Scandinavian media, Kyrgyzstani media institutions are not "non- confessional, on grounds of institutional history, commercial funding or media regulation" and there is extended "use of public media with a strong confessional orientation."50 Secular media outlets, such as *Maral fm* and *Ayan*, are not simply autonomous and disconnected parts of the institution of media; they are also reflections of the religious views and biases of these outlets'

47 Lovheim, "Mediatisation of Religion," 155.
48 Ibid., 162.
49 Ibid., 164.
50 Lynch, "What Can We Learn?," 205.

editors and founders. For example, Shabdan Abdiraim uulu, chief executive officer of *Ayan*, stated that his grandfather, Turdakun Saparbayev, who founded the channel, allowed it to expand to Bishkek on the condition that it would stay true to long-established Kyrgyz and Islamic traditions.51 Similarly, the founders of *Maral fm* have a goal of spreading virtuousness and promoting good manners through their radio station.52 Suffice it to say that these editors and founders are Muslims, and they cannot but carry religious values and visions into their offices. In combining religious and secular media, the study does not seek to conflate the two, but rather to highlight the peculiar media context of Kyrgyzstan, where the boundaries between these two media typesare not clear.

Media's Role in the (Re-) Distribution and Constellation of Religious Power and Authority

Media in Kyrgyzstan play an important role in defining the power constellation among religious actors and institutions through their selective and discriminatory distribution of media exposure. The case of Kyrgyzstan is significantly different from the case of Scandinavian countries. However, the key difference is not between Islam and Christianity as religions, but their nature and functioning as institutions. Power and authority in Christianity has long resided in the church, which has a history of being the main and sole source of authority. In Christianity, religious leaders acquire and retain power and legitimacy mostly through their attachment to clearly identifiable religious institutions, such as the church. This is not the case for religion in Kyrgyzstan, since Islam does not typically follow this institutional pattern and logic, and power does not reside in a single and clearly identifiable institution.

There are multiple institutions in Islam, such as the Qur'an, the Prophet's hadith, religious doctrines, and law schools. Religious power and authority reside in religious leaders' knowledge of these sources and their ability to adapt and convey them to people in a manner that fits their lives—that is, in accordance with ordinary people's social and cultural context. One can say that religious leaders' authority is directly related to their ability to adapt general Islamic institutions to local realities. This is not to say that the Spiritual Ad- ministration of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan (the Muftiiat) does not hold any power, but rather to highlight that the mere existence of such an organization—or

51 Shabdan Abdiraim uulu (executive director at Ayan tv channel), personal interview withthe author, August 2016.

52 Ilgiz Zhamalbekov (show host at Maral fm radio station), personal interview with the author, August 2016.

someone's affiliation with it—does not guarantee an organization or individual any authority and power. The current head of the Muftiiat, mufti Maksat ajy, is not the most influential religious cleric in the country; he is at best third, behind Chubak ajy and Abdushukur ajy, whose power lies in the depth of their knowledge and their unrivaled ability to synthesize that knowledge for the general Muslim population.

The issue of the media's role in influencing power constellations has long been on the radar of sociologists and media scholars. Hernes was among the first to ask, "In what ways do media redistribute power in society?"53 The case of Islam in Kyrgyzstan is quite unique because it showcases how the power constellation in strong and institutionalized religions is reshaped when it comes into close contact with the media. For example, Chubak ajy would not have achieved his current level of popularity and influence were it not for the media, which picked up his sermons and circulated them nationwide. His media-facilitated influence has increased to the point that most people seek his opinion after the Muftiiat issues a *fatwa* on a given issue, making him a parallel institution with the potential to challenge the Muftiiat.

Media contribute to the maintenance of the existing power constellation and facilitate any changes that might occur within the authority aspect of religion. Specifically, media strengthen the positions of already popular and powerful religious leaders and organizations, and extend religious actors' fame and authority to new physical and media spaces. "Who is popular offline is likely to be powerful online."54 For example, the two most famous religious leaders in Kyrgyzstan, Chubak ajy Zhalilov and Abdushukur ajy Narmatov, constantly appear in four of the five media outlets analyzed in this study. They are frequent guests both of *Maral fm's* weekly Q&A religious show, "Iman—Oi Tolgoo,"55 and of *Ayan* tv channel's Q&A show, "Shariat."56 Indeed, due to the popularity of Chubak ajy and public demand for him to get more air time, he is now featured in a special Q&A show called "Imam Menen 60 Munot" [60 Minutes with a Religious Scholar] on Maral fm.57 Abdushukur ajy's Friday ser- mons are shown on *Ayan tv*—as part of the show "Zhuma Khutbasy"58 [Friday Sermon]—and printed in the *Beyish* newspaper.59

53 Quoted in Hjarvard, "The Mediatisation of Religion."

54 Waisbord, "A Metatheory of Mediatization," 185.

55 Ilgiz Zhamalbekov, personal interview with the author, August 2016.

56 Shabdan Abdiraim uulu, personal interview with the author, August 2016.

57 Ilgiz Zhamalbekov, personal interview with the author, August 2016.

58 Shabdan Abdiraim uulu, personal interview with the author, August 2016.

59 Zair (an instructor at the Islamic University of Kyrgyzstan and staff member of the *Beyish* newspaper), personal interview with the author, August 2016.

There are various reasons that these two scholars appear in almost every media outlet, but the most frequently cited justifications are their existing popularity, which draws viewers and listeners, and their ability to communicate religious knowledge via the media in a clear and effective manner. Shergazy Seitaliev, the founder of the *Hidayat* mobile app, stated that his decision to post video materials only by Chubak ajy and Abdushukur ajy is based on public demand for their sermons, but added that even if he wanted to post the video sermons of other scholars, he would not be able to find any.60 Less popular religious scholars do not have anyone to record their sermons and circulate them to the wider public, whereas Nasaat Media records all of Chubak ajy's lessons and Abdushukur ajy's sermons are posted on Nasaat.kg.

Waisbord summarizes this tendency as follows: "In principle, we all have a voice, but not everyone's voice is similarly important, influential, and equally heard by others."61 Media do not simply reproduce the existing distribution of power, but also intensify it, multiplying the power of certain religious leaders. Mediatization leads to a communicative space of media replacing a physical sacred space for religious rituals.62 That communicative space makes the power constellation in religion more acute.

Media's Role in Bridging the Gap between Religion and Ethnicity Media is one of the institutions that is (albeit unintentionally) contributing toerasing the dividing lines between religion and ethnicity in Kyrgyzstan, andit is doing so through language. Since Islam originated in what is now Saudi Arabia, and the Qur'an and hadith are written in Arabic, Islam in Kyrgyzstanhas historically been associated with places most people never travel to anda foreign language most people never learn. It is only with recent media developments that Arabic is no longer key to understanding and learning aboutone's religion. All five media outlets in the study communicate religious knowledge in Kyrgyz; only *Umma* magazine has made efforts to provide its contentin Russian.63 The executive director of *Ayan* explained that broadcasting onlyin Kyrgyz is tied to the decision to support state efforts to develop the Kyrgyzlanguage, combined with higher demand for content in Kyrgyz than in other

60 Shergazy Seitaliev (founder of the *Hidayat* mobile app), personal interview with the author, August 2016.

61 Waisbord, "A Metatheory of Mediatization," 185.

62 Quoted in Setianto, "Mediatization of Religion."

63 Eliana-Mariam Sattarova (editor of *Umma* magazine), personal interview with theauthor, August 2016.

languages.64 Ilgiz Zhamalbekov, the host of the religious show on *Maral fm*, stated that developing the Kyrgyz language was one of the goals of the radio station and that there were no plans to have shows in other languages.65 Others cited a lack of financial resources for translating their content; nevertheless, all of them highlighted that Kyrgyz language should come first.

This trend of Kyrgyz being the only language through which the media spread religious knowledge eventually leads to the obsolescence of categorical divisions between religion and ethnicity. As Sheila Brown states, "Above all, mediatization in the contemporary sense refers to a universe in which the meaning of ontological divisions is collapsing: divisions between fact and fiction, nature and culture, global and local, science and art, technology and humanity."66 Media play an important role in mediating Kyrgyzstani—mostly ethnic Kyrgyz—Muslims' religious and ethnic identities.

Islam has already met opposition from the local followers of Tengrism, which was the pre-Islamic faith of the Kyrgyz people. Tengri believe and worship the sky, the Tengri, and argue that it is wrong for Kyrgyz people to be Muslims, since it is allegedly a foreign religion imposed by outsiders. Although Tengri people remain a very small minority, they have stirred quite a debate about what it means to be a true Kyrgyz—at least in the media. This small group seeks to redefine Kyrgyz identity and cause an identity conflict by arguing that the Islamic faith is inherently contradictory to the nature and history of Kyrgyz people. Though media gives this conflict a forum, media religious programming nevertheless contributes to the elimination of this identity conflict and the amalgamation of Kyrgyz and Islamic identities. The media not only provides more opportunities for Kyrgyz Muslims to learn about their religion, but also bridges the gap between the local and the foreign: being Kyrgyz and practicing Islam, a religion that originated in distant lands and uses a language that is incomprehensible to most of its Kyrgyzstani adherents.

Media's Role in Producing a Sense of Community and Belonging Media has taken on many of the functions performed by religious institutionsregarding the creation and sustaining of communities. According to Hjarvard,one of the four processes through which media change human communication and interaction is the extension of "human communication abilities in

64 Shabdan Abdiraim uulu, personal interview with the author, August 2016.

65 Ilgiz Zhamalbekov, personal interview with the author, August 2016.

66 Sheila Brown, *Crime and Law in Media Culture* (Berkshire, UK: Open University Press, 2003), 27.

both time and space."67 Kyrgyzstan's Muslims are divided along generational, regional, doctrinal, and ethnic lines. In such a context, media play a crucial role in providing a common platform for communicating certain messages, regardless of space and time. They "make it possible to interact with others across political and cultural frontiers," and as a consequence of its "growing complexity and encompassing nature, society takes on a complex connectivity."68 I do not argue that media can solve all social divisions; instead, I argue that media's ability to provide shared religious experiences allows Muslims of various back- grounds to relate to each other in more complex ways. Media contribute to the production and enhancement of senses of identity and community.69

Maral fm's religious shows are broadcast in five of the country's seven oblasts,70 *Ayan* tv channel broadcasts in three oblasts and the two largest and most populous cities (Bishkek and Osh),71 all one needs to download *Hidayat* mobile app is a phone and internet connection (which many Kyrgyzstani people can easily afford nowadays), and *Beyish* and *Umma* do their best to reach as many people in as many areas of Kyrgyzstan as they can. When *Beyish* was first published in 2014, it was able to send copies to all seven oblasts, but due to the absence of official and established distribution channels, as well as financial issues, it is not able to circulate every new issue (published once or twice permonth) that broadly.72

Similarly, the editor of *Umma*, Eliana-Mariam Sattarova, described how they aim to reach as many regions as their resources allow. Originally launched as a magazine for the Russian-speaking part of the population, the editors of *Umma* were asked to also produce a Kyrgyz translation after many people in the regions expressed interest in reading the magazine in Kyrgyz.73 This is indicative of the fact that these media outlets—often though informal channels—reach people well beyond large cities and even country borders. When Chubak ajy and/or Abdushukur ajy travel to Moscow to hold meetings with Kyrgyzstani labor migrants at the main mosque, more than 10,000 people show up. This is due to the fact that the media has extended their popularity to compatriots living abroad. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, it is indicative of how Kyrgyzstani Muslims are able to engage in similar religious experiences

67 Hjarvard, "The Mediatisation of Society," 105.
68 Ibid., 129.
69 Ibid., 120.
70 Ilgiz Zhamalbekov, personal interview with the author, August 2016.
71 Shabdan Abdiraim uulu, personal interview with the author, August 2016.
72 Zair, personal interview with the author, August 2016.
73 Eliana-Mariam Sattarova, personal interview with the author, August 2016.

regardless of where they are and when they choose to tune in. Media may not rid Kyrgyzstani Muslims of various divisions, but they certainly contribute to enhanced religious identity, and thus more and different ways for Kyrgyzstani Muslims to think of themselves and other Muslims of different ethnic, generational and doctrinal backgrounds.

Media's Role in Changing Perceptions of Religion

The very idea of religion changes as people change in time and space; media's role in facilitating these ideational transformations lies in their selective presentation of materials and the manner in which these are communicated. "A focus on perception reminds us that religion is not a universal static thing, but rather that our understandings and definitions of religion are dynamic and relative to time and place."74 People's understanding of religion changes not only in accordance with physical spaces, but also over time and depending on social class. Media do not have complete control over people's minds and can- not compel people to take on particular perceptions of religion. Nevertheless, they are able to influence the public's ideas of what religion is or is not, since religious institutions have partially ceded to media "the ability to define what counts as religion, and what parts of religion are worth talking about."75

This transformation of authority was by no means a voluntary act of power-sharing, but rather stemmed from the increasing importance of media as an institution and its development of its own logic. Lynch suggests disengaging from the discussion about how media is changing religion's content and instead focusing on how "particular media may be giving shape to our perceptions of what religion is and how we think and talk about it."76 Similarly, I argue that media in Kyrgyzstan are not changing the content of religion, a task that is currently far beyond their capacity. Media are much less ambitious, or they are ambitious in a different way; they are causing Kyrgyzstani Muslims to rethink their existing paradigms of religion.

The state, independent religious actors and media work together to shape the direction of religious transformations in Kyrgyzstan. Media are able to play a role in altering perceptions of religion primarily due to their operational logic and the resources they have to spread information to the masses. Yet they cannot operate independently of state regulations regarding religion. Moreover, religious actors often have the agency to control what appears in the media, and thus remain in the discussion over changing perceptions of religion.

74 Clark, "Considering Religion," 181.

75 Hjarvard, "The Mediatisation of Religion," 125.

76 Lynch, "What Can We Learn?," 181.

All the representatives of media outlets I interviewed cited the alleged lack of true and reliable information about religion as the main reason for their decisions either to establish their organizations or to add religious shows. They all want to provide what they often refer to as "true" and "non-distorted" information about religion. Talking to these representatives, I got a strong impression that Kyrgyzstan is experiencing a significant shortage of reliable sources of religious knowledge. Whether or not that is actually the case is a matter of extensive and heated debate, not only in Kyrgyzstan but also in many other Muslim-majority countries, where different factions contest media space with claims to hold the ultimate truth.

All media outlet representatives claimed that they made their own decisions about whom to invite and what information to communicate. Media biases in material selection, namely whom they invite and what they talk and write about, lead to the formation and spreading of a particular form of Islam. This is not to imply that, as the result of media exposure, all people will have similar perceptions of religion, but rather to note how what appears regularly in the media may set perception frames. For example, coming back to the topic of popular religious leaders, media outlets are tempted to invite Chubak ajy or Abdushukur ajy since they draw large audiences, ensuring that the time allocated for religious shows on *Maral fm* and *Ayan* is made the best use of, for the media outlets as well as for viewers and listeners. Even though religious media do not enter the media market to make profits, they still seek to bring in enough revenue to sustain themselves, meaning that they too feel pressured to produce content involving famous scholars in order to stay afloat. To be fair, it is worth mentioning that the founders of these media outlets are often followers of certain religious leaders and hold their words as the ultimate truth, leading them to simply ignore the teachings of others.

The expanded presence of similar religious leaders across various media leads to a personification of religion—a situation whereby people experience religion as mediated by the individuals they believe are the most knowledgeable. Furthermore, all five media outlets confirmed that they have strict religious doctrinal criteria that their guests and material have to meet. These include belonging to the state-supported *Hanafi* school of law and preaching within the framework of *Maturudi* religious doctrine. Maral FM is a good example of this. They display photos of all the guests they have had; looking through them, one cannot help but notice that they all come from religious establishments that are aligned with the state-promoted version of Islam. By imposing such criteria, media contribute to the perception that there is a certain form of religion that is both safe and fit for the Kyrgyzstani context. Linguistic pragmatics scholars have shown that communication is one form of action

and "by communicating, people exchange not only information, but they influence one another and their mutual relationship."77 Religious leaders and their audiences negotiate what religion is and/or what it should be, either by rejecting or accepting what they hear and see in the media.

Conclusions

This article set itself the goal of exploring media's role in the transformation of religion in Kyrgyzstan. In so doing, it challenged the assumptions made in Hjarvard's mediatization theory. As the empirical discussion has shown, media in Kyrgyzstan are not supreme institutions that can shape religion at will through their own logic. However, media are important in facilitating the changes occurring within religion, and there is no denying that religion transforms as it interacts with the media, whether due to popular perceptions or power constellations. The findings also point to the interconnectedness of various factors, such as state policies and religious actors' agency in influencing and re-shaping religion, that (in combination with media) work to produce changes within the institution of religion.

The article has also discussed how the continuous and extended presentation of religion by similar religious sources across different media suggests that people's perceptions of religion are bound to its media representations. Ordinary adherents of Islam in Kyrgyzstan, who have neither the language skills nor the time to study original sources in Arabic, are left to learn and perceive their faith through the eyes of the religious leaders who dominate the country's media space. Jean Baudrillard's simulacrum theory is more than relevant for this empirical finding: he argues that symbols of media culture form a simulacrum, or hyperreality, that seems more real than the physical and social world and can even replace it.78 Religious individuals, messages, images, and phrases found in the Kyrgyzstani media create a very specific notion of religion. Hjarvard's theory is not to be taken at face value, and media in no way fully uproot established perceptions. Rather, they facilitate and intensify already ongoing transformation processes within religion.

I see several avenues for further research. They are tied to the fact that there is no single media logic governing all types of media, the state control exerted over media and religion, and demographic and linguistic differences among

77 Hjarvard, "The Mediatisation of Society," 111.

78 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations* (Ann Arbor, mi: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

Kyrgyzstani Muslims. Scholars have shown the importance "of attending to differences in gender, age, economic and cultural capital to analyze how the tendencies of mediatization of religion" found in the theory "apply to different groups in different contexts, and what this implies for how religion changes through mediatization."79 The mediatization of religion takes on unique paths in application to different groups. In the case of Kyrgyzstan, this involves Russian-speaking Muslims of Kyrgyz and Uyghur origin, as well as Uzbeks in the country's south. These Russian- and Uzbek-speaking linguistic minority groups within the Kyrgyzstani *umma* deserve a separate study, as there seems to be a disconnect between them and mainstream media outlets available predominantly in the Kyrgyz language. Meanwhile, state control affects the functioning of both media and religion as institutions and thus merits a separate study.

79 Lovheim, "Mediatisation of Religion," 161.