



THE  
DEFORESTATION  
OF  
**faith**

Made Possible By:  **FAITH  
MEDIA**  
INITIATIVE

A Global Study  
on the Depictions  
of Faith in Media



# Executive Summary

**What happens when only part of a story is told? What if the story is complex, rich in layers, and deeply important to tens of millions of people?**

The consulting firm Davis & Partners (D&P) recently conducted a global study of the depictions of faith in media, sponsored by The Faith & Media Initiative. The goal was to provide actionable data that illustrates the challenges, fairly represents what media consumers want, and identifies solutions for bridging the gap between the two sectors.

This global, English-speaking study was conducted using a proprietary artificial intelligence platform, which utilizes machine learning to extract meaning from text. D&P gathered and analyzed over 30 million documents from social media, Reddit, YouTube, news, blogs, message boards and forums. The research examined the sentiment and opinions across the entire socio-political spectrum of clergy, journalists, and consumers.

The findings demonstrate that, in the same way deforestation has harmed the biosphere, there has been a comparable – albeit figurative – deforestation of authentic, proactive and positive reporting on the role of faith in mainstream news media.

To be sure, thoughtful, even positive faith-related content does exist. However, the algorithmic echo-chambers of social media, designed to surface sensational content that generates the most engagement, shields consumers from more balanced content, including the vital role faith plays in society. Instead of a balanced, or even positive depiction of faith, what has “grown over” are noxious “weeds” – content often laden with stereotypes and misrepresentation.

**The result of this incomplete picture? As is the case for any community whose story is not fully told, harm is done. Religion and faith communities are demonized, fostering misunderstanding, distrust, and polarization.**

There are several reasons for this overgrowth of weed-content. Journalists admit that beyond the traditions they were brought up with (if any), they are untrained in and lack understanding of faith-related subjects, or even how to write about them. Similarly, faith leaders are wary of the media and not trained in how to work effectively with them. Over many years, the rift between religious leaders and journalists widened, and in the absence of empathy, apathy and misperceptions grew in its place.

Compounding this problem, journalists report they lack time, and the support of their editors who only show limited interest in faith-related stories. This is due in large part because of the perception in newsrooms that religious content will not be of interest to their readers or of value to their media brands. Additionally, with a business model built on clicks, content that isn't proven to generate page views gets set aside. In a challenging and competitive business environment for news outlets, revenue concerns drive editorial decisions.

Faith leaders and their communication teams also contribute to the problem by their reluctance in dealing with the media. They can be hesitant and unwilling to speak with transparency about controversial news topics because they often rightly fear being misinterpreted or that the story will have a negative slant. With little to gain from talking to faith leaders, journalists also cite a reluctance to even have an unproductive conversation.

Some of this gap in positive, authentic,

faith-related content has been filled by independent content creators with no organizational agenda. They number in the millions, compared to a scant 6,500 journalists employed by the media industry in the United States alone.

The research conducted for this report also illuminates a path forward. There is still fertile ground available for the millions looking for better coverage of faith. More satisfied consumers means more ad revenue, as well as an opportunity to restore some of the trust in media that has been eroded in recent years. Even better, with faith and media – two pillar institutions of modern society – working together to tell a greater, more authentic story, it is possible society will become more civil, values-based decision making will become the norm, and the polarization that plagues us will dissipate.

To mend the gap between media and faith leaders, a global approach is needed to bridge the divide and restore trust – bringing the two sectors together for improved collaboration and understanding. With training for both faith and media members, data-driven insights to ensure everyone is armed with knowledge to create positive outcomes, and recognition of those who are doing this work well, both faith and media can do more good.

Interconnected, evidence-based initiatives can help transform an underbrush of patchy content into a lush forest of balanced, thoughtful stories about faith that serve the millions of readers who currently don't see themselves represented fairly in mainstream media.

# The State of Faith In Media Today

- **63%** of faith-related media content can be classified as provocative, and depicts faith and faith institutions in a negative light. This comes from mainstream news outlets and other content creators, and usually includes controversial or politically charged subjects like sexual abuse, LGBTQ+ issues, and more.
- **20%** of faith-related content could be considered neutral to positive in nature, and is often generated by faith groups. This content is focused on religious doctrine, miracles, healing, how-to on personal growth, and more.
- **11%** of faith-related content could be considered extreme in nature. This includes an even smaller sub-category of content, which, in its most dramatic form, could be characterized as “hate speech,” and therefore damaging to the perception of faith’s value in media.
- **6%** of faith-related content is both positive and personal in nature. It is often generated by content creators, influencers, and the public, discussing subjects such as overcoming challenges and becoming better versions of ourselves.
- Among all content types, **78%** of faith-related content originates on social media, and appears to be created at the grassroots level, mostly without the input of the leaders of faith communities. **16%** originates from blogs, and **6%** is created by news organizations.
- Unfortunately, with social media being the primary platform for faith-related content, anonymous algorithms promote content based on virality, instead of quality and insight. Not surprisingly, when a story does go viral, it is picked up by mainstream press, further reinforcing the preponderance of negative faith-related content.

## Who Creates Faith-Related Media?

Faith-related media creators consist of a diverse universe of professional and amateur content creators.

- 6,500 professional journalists, including 400 reporters who identify as having a speciality in faith-related topics (U.S.)
- Religious organizations
- Social media influencers and bloggers whose creative output is a main source of income
- Experts and academics
- Entertainment media content creators
- Content creation firms working on behalf of faith-related clients
- Citizen journalists or amateur content creators



## Why Isn't Faith More Positively Depicted?

- Journalists report being overworked, understaffed, time-starved and lacking adequate training on the complexities of faith.
- Less than 20% of journalists feel they understand the nuances of faith beyond the religious traditions they grew up with.
- Lack of support from editors for reporters who do want to write about faith-related stories due to a perception that faith-related content is not of interest to the general public .
- Faith leaders lack a deep understanding of the trade craft of journalism, and they are rarely proactive about seeking encounters with the press, relying mostly on a reactive stance.
- When faith leaders do interact with the media, interactions tend toward prepared statements featuring careful “sound bites” instead of transparency and candor.
- Faith groups are not proactive about sharing positive news with mainstream media, only disseminating information among their members.



## The Who, Where, and How of Faith-Related Media Consumption

There are more than 35 million English-language consumers who would welcome faith-related content in their mainstream media feeds. Among those consumers are:

- **39%** identify as people of color
- **26%** identify as Evangelicals
- **22%** identify as Protestants
- **27%** identify as highly religious people of various faith traditions

With regard to where and how faith-related media is consumed, the study indicated that:

- **71%** of faith-related conversations are in urban locales, with **29%** in rural locations
- **87%** of these readers find and engage with faith-based content via preferred media channels aligned with their political beliefs
- **85%** of those seeking faith-related content use a search engine to locate it, versus **10%** who navigate directly to the websites belonging to major faith groups
- **86%** of faith-based content experiences don't go further than initial consumption, and only **14%** of consumers of faith-related content share or re-share the content via social media

# Conclusions

All evidence suggests faith is not fading in the public square - only its authentic and positive representation. In fact, according to the Pew Research Center, 84% of humankind affiliates with a religion. Journalists aren't encouraged to get the whole story, faith leaders can be opaque or insular. The result of this bi-directional disinterest to engage is a great divide of mutual distrust that prevents a more authentic depiction of faith. Stepping into the void is a veritable army of citizen journalists who are writing about faith, but lack a platform for the widespread distribution of their work. Asking for a solution are millions of consumers who want more and better faith-related content.

**With challenge also comes opportunity. If these constituencies can come together, the deforestation of faith can be reversed.**

# Opportunities

The AI-assisted study validated five strategies that can help deliver meaningful change and replenish the forest of faith-based content.

- The building of a global coalition of faith and media leaders to invite more productive dialogue and foster more frequent collaboration.
- The development of training programs that can help journalists learn more about the positive aspects of faith and belief and, equally as important, help faith leaders and their communications professionals manage the expectations, needs and realities of the media.
- The empowerment of amateur content creators and the establishment of quality standards so their work on faith related topics can be more widely and reliably distributed to news organizations which could result in a new abundant source of faith-related media from which journalists could build stories.
- A recognition and incentive program for content creators, journalists, faith leaders and faith communities who are doing this work well, spotlighting best practices that can be shared and emulated.
- Original insights on the global landscape of faith and media, early identification of trends and opportunities, and a robust database for sourcing content and content creators.



## Summary

Modern progressive nations have made great effort to promote a society that celebrates and promotes diversity, equity, and inclusion. Yet, faith is often not part of that equation – even though it transcends race, sexuality, and gender. The sensational, negative depiction of faith has made people reluctant to speak out or share their faith, fearful of being misunderstood and having a negative meta narrative assigned to them. As a result, faith has suffered from a diminished voice in the public square. Unfortunately, this silence only fuels more misunderstanding and intolerance.

The research clearly indicates that it is time to bridge the divide between the faith and media sectors. Not only will this reconnect consumers with media they've long abandoned or ceased to trust, it will help foster an environment where faith – important to so many – is considered meaningful and constructive to the zeitgeist of our day.

Sometimes we can't see the forest for the trees, but that doesn't mean we should forget the trees altogether.

# The Deforestation of Faith in Numbers

**63%**

of faith-related content is provocative, depicting faith in a negative light.



Less than

**20%**

of journalists feel they understand the nuances of faith.



**85%**

of people use a search engine when searching for faith-related content. 10% navigate directly to the websites belonging to major faith groups.



## English Speaking Consumers Interested in Faith-Related Content



**35**  
MILLION

39% People of color  
27% Highly religious across faith traditions  
26% Evangelical  
22% Protestant

### Algorithms Fuel Division

Nearly **80%**

of faith related content comes from restrictive social media

These unchecked algorithmic echo-chambers reinforce division and mask areas of agreement.



### Silence Fuel Intolerance

#### Faith is Muted

People are afraid to talk about, or exercise their spiritual life in public.

Faith communities have a shrinking place in the public square.



#### Faith-Literacy Diminishes

- Lack of awareness
- Misrepresentation & stereotyping
- Division
- Hostility

## Origin of All Faith-Related Content



**78%**  
SOCIAL MEDIA



**16%**  
BLOGS



**6%**  
NEWS ORGANIZATIONS