

## Why bother with the media?

PAUL TEUSNER

Churches have very varied attitudes towards media technologies and popular mass media.

Some try, in vain, to attract young people by using PowerPoint presentations with their sermons or to display responsorial psalm verses. Others use videos for film nights or Alpha courses.

Popular media, such as on TV or the Internet, rarely get a mention in church services (except for youth group events). Priests and ministers extol the virtues of reading over watching TV and the values of religion over the values of popular culture.

Christian media such as Bible magazines and CDs of new music are either welcomed and promoted as an alternative culture for the young, or rejected as individualistic and devoid of sound doctrine.

Yet our universities are taking more and more interest in the intersection between mass media, religion and popular culture.

We are in a period of 'media convergence', a time when one form of mass media is superseded by another as the dominant cultural medium. Protestantism developed in a similar period, when the printing press became Europe's most effective mode of creating and disseminating knowledge and information.

The late 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the rapid rise of television as the new dominant medium. Now television's place as our primary source of cultural information is being challenged by various forms of computer-mediated communication, including the World Wide Web, email and file sharing.

Just as printing did 500 years ago, audio-visual media like TV and the Internet not only change how we think, but the places and themes we talk about, and make decisions about, how we live as a society. Mass media, television in particular, have become the main forum for social discourse, and the place where our views on politics, government, gender roles, family life, and even religion, are shared and discussed.

In the period known as the Enlightenment scientific rationalism dominated all our social institutions. The great product of the Enlightenment was the secularisation of culture. Thinkers in this period saw reason alone as enabling right thought and right action: religion was viewed as a barrier to truth, democracy and pluralism. The result was to divide Church and State, and to relegate religious thought and practice to churches and seminaries and private life, out of the public sphere.

Today the rise of audiovisual media as the dominant public media in our culture has led to the demise of secularisation, in two ways –

Firstly, audiovisual mass popular media have added ritual dimensions to the communication of information, to the point of *resacralising* popular culture. We see this, for example, in the news reports of responses to the fall of the Twin Towers on September 11 2001, images of public prayer vigils, with candles and prayers pasted on billboards next to photographs of victims. We also see it in the *Big Brother*

spectacle, where contestants leave the real world by crossing a bridge over cheering, almost delirious, fans toward the BB house just as legendary heroes made their way to Mt Olympus. Audiovisual media re-form and re-create religious symbols and narratives in their endeavour to portray the world's story.

Secondly, audiovisual media have allowed religious institutions to re-enter the sphere of public discourse. On the one hand, politicians affirm the secularisation ideology by telling outspoken bishops and priests to 'stick to spiritual concerns, and leave the politics to us'. Yet when we see our Prime Minister appear at a Hillsong gathering we realise how politicians continue to rely on support from religious groups.

So the role of religious institutions in public life today seems to depend on how they involve themselves in the discourses played out in mass media. Evangelical Protestant churches appear to thrive there – they have fewer ethical concerns about borrowing from popular culture (for example, by marketing Christian mobile phone covers or iPod shuffle cases in the shape of a cross) and their mythologies and doctrines are aligned with the codes and narratives arranged in mass media.

For evangelicals, the Gospel is seen as a dynamic and creative force. The dualistic theology of evangelicalism marries nicely with the symbolism and narratives of television. Evangelicals hold a utilitarian view of media, and emphasise the individual as a social unit, in the same way that TV does, focussing on an experiential and emotional communication of faith.

For the generation whose aesthetic standards are shaped by a culture of sound and vision, the mainline churches seem 'boring' and 'irrelevant', constrained by the formulations and regulations of a print-based culture. This generation sees the world they live in as rejected by these churches as consumerist and devoid of meaning.

Here is a modern paradox. Those societies that have established or majority national churches (such as in Western Europe) face declining church attendances and the voice of the churches is increasingly unheard in public life. On the other hand, those nations founded on the basis of a division between church and state, such as the United States, and (to a lesser extent) Australia find that many forms of religion flourish in a pluralist, autonomous social sphere.

So why should the churches be concerned with mass media? We can take our cue from the Gospels. In them we see a Jesus who uses parables to explain God's purpose for the world. These stories are free from religious jargon, and use popular themes and the symbols of an agrarian society to give a picture of the Kingdom of God. And in telling these stories Jesus takes theological debate out of the Temple and into the streets and lanes, defying the authority of the religious elite.

Two thousand years later, people use mass media to construct a religious identity, unconfined by religious institutions and religious doctrine. The authority of the churches is challenged by the popularity of programs like *Supernatural*, *Touched by an Angel* and *Sunday Night Safran*. These explore religious issues in a language and format that is by far more accessible and attractive. People alienated by the old forms of religious expression on a Sunday morning are finding safe places to explore new symbols, stories and ways of living in community in the virtual world.

The future of the Church depends on its willingness to enter this world, to explore the conversations played out there, and to accept that is no longer the single authority on religious life.

- ? Paul Teusner is a Uniting Church minister doing postgraduate research at RMIT University on the role of the Internet in shaping “the emerging church”.

**OLD STORY: NEW MEDIA**

The research team at RMIT University which is studying the role of the media in the historical development and the present ferment of Christianity is led by Associate Professor Peter Horsfield. He argues that Christianity has always been a ‘mediated spirit’, inextricably linked to the nature of its mediation.

Dr Horsfield has published his insights in a number of books and articles. But the fullest expression of them is in a CD *The Mediated Spirit*, published by the Commission for Mission of the Uniting Church synod of Victoria.

Besides downloadable articles, the CD includes Powerpoint presentations and ‘pop culture parables’, a list of relevant websites and several new video spots produced by the Christian Television Association of Victoria.

Obviously he believes Marshall McLuhan was right: the medium *is* the message.