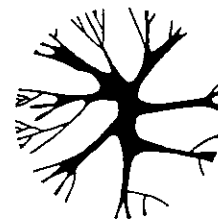


RESEARCH TRENDS IN RELIGIOUS COMMUNICATION



Contribution of the Church to National Broadcasting Policy

The survey of recent public inquiries and other research on national broadcasting policy and media reform movements reveals several tendencies which are of special interest to those in religious communications. This is a relatively new and growing area of communications research and has considerable importance for groups like the churches which are concerned with the cultural values expressed by broadcasting institutions. We will summarise briefly these tendencies and then examine several examples of how churches are becoming involved in national broadcasting policies.

Planning of National Communications Systems

A major long-range tendency is towards more centralised planning of all media services — the press, radio and television — in order to avoid duplication and to ensure a broader range of services, especially to neglected groups. The process has been especially fostered by UNESCO and, although developing countries have been more open to planning, industrialised countries are also moving towards closer planning. What kind of planning emerges depends very much on which groups are ready to become involved.

Greater Accountability of the Mass Media to the Public

In at least three of the examples of policy making process cited in the Review Article of this issue of TRENDS — Britain, the U.S., and West Germany — the greater demand by the public to participate in decisions regarding programming and general policy is a major issue. A significantly large group of TV viewers are no longer willing to take whatever is given to them by a small group of programmers in a national broadcasting network.

There seem to be several reasons for this: the rising educational levels and more discriminatory tastes, an increasingly heterogeneous and pluralistic population, the growing emphasis on the rights of local and regional cultural traditions and more respect for minority rights.

Religious communicators can only applaud this policy trend toward greater accountability and opportunity for participation. However, it is not always clear what accountability means (to government funding agencies? To the public?) or what kind of institutional mechanisms are possible or necessary in different countries.

There is also the question of what religious communicators can contribute. In the past the churches were often more concerned with censorship — what the media shouldn't do —

than with making a positive contribution to better quality programming. Broadcasting was considered as a technical matter, of concern to a small group of experts in government or among network and advertising entrepreneurs. The church was only interested in using broadcasting for its own purposes and for defending its own flock. To actively participate in the national policy making process in a positive way is a new approach to religious communicators. This participation can be seen as the responsibility of individual Christians acting according to their own informed consciences, as a corporate effort of a church through its well-organised communication offices, or as some combination of both.

Diversification of Services

The planned diversification of services to meet the needs of different groups is made possible, in part, by a nation's economic growth so that it can afford the equipment necessary for multiple channels and more extensive production facilities. Many of the churches have discussed extensively new broadcasting technologies and made plans for taking advantage of them for their own internal use. They may have a less clear idea of the national or local policy that could make a new technology like cable of more benefit to the whole community.

Increasing Pressure for Commercial Media

Internationally the normal administrative structure for broadcasting has been the public corporation independent of but related to government in some way. Advertising has been avoided as much as possible or strictly controlled. However, the relatively rapid addition of further services has been extremely difficult for public broadcasting, both in developing and industrialised countries. Public broadcasting faces continual problems of underfunding, especially if it is expected to provide the norm of quality and service in the broadcasting system. The temptation is to rely increasingly on commercial broadcasting. The future of public broadcasting depends very much on the degree of citizen support and is a matter of how the public wants to spend its money. Here the churches may offer leadership.

THE UNITED STATES: CHURCH-SPONSORED MEDIA REFORM MOVEMENTS

One of the most impressive examples of a Church contribution to national broadcasting policy is the Office of

Communication (OC) in New York of the United Church of Christ.

The OC began as an internal communication service for the UCC; providing filmstrips, television and radio programming, an international newsletter for its pastoral workers, etc. Under the leadership of Everett Rogers the OC has become a major centre of media reform in the United States. The reason is that concern for Christian values must mean, among other things, an active concern for people's media rights.

The OC opened up an era of making the media accountable to the public — especially to minority groups — when in 1964 they petitioned the FCC to deny the renewal of the licence of WLBT, the most powerful national network station in the mid-South of the U.S., on the grounds of discriminating against blacks in programming and employment. This action set the pattern followed by other media reform groups.

At present, the OC is active in a wide range of advocacy work: participating in an FCC inquiry into children's television programming; advising various minority groups, including blacks and the elderly, on how to approach the FCC; and counselling minorities and others on employment in the media.

The OC has been a leader in challenging the attempts of broadcasters to have virtually all regulatory powers taken away from the FCC. Along with the Consumer Federation of America the OC petitioned the FCC to require that cable TV systems make facilities available to local community groups. The OC cooperates with the Television Awareness Training Program of the United Methodist Church which gives training courses to help television viewers understand how TV programming and advertising can affect behaviour and attitudes.

Internationally, the OC united church groups and others in the U.S. to defend Third World nations' access rights to the radio frequency spectrum at the World Administrative Radio Conference in Geneva and to influence U.S. policy in support of developing countries.

The Telecommunications Consumer Coalition

The Branscomb and Savage evaluation of media reform efforts in the U.S. (cited in the Review Article) points out as the main problem the lack of unity both in organisation and purpose. The OC of the United Church of Christ, under the direction of Ralph Jennings, has taken the initiative in coordinating media reform groups. Realising the need to pool the resources of groups which work to defend and extend citizens' communications rights, the OC and the Consumer Federation of America formed the Telecommunications Consumer Coalition in 1978. It helps churches and consumer groups stay abreast of the latest broadcasting, cable television and common carrier developments. The TCC has 132 national, regional and local participants. Over 40 percent are religious bodies, including some UCC conferences and churches, major denominations, the National Council of Churches and the U.S. Catholic Conference.

As an information clearinghouse the Coalition analyses new communications policies and technologies and provides counsel, legal advice and technical aid on issues such as broadcasting and telephone practices, equal employment and exploitation of women, minorities, the aged and the disabled.

Many churches in the U.S. have followed the example of the United Church of Christ, and have directed some of the

activities of their communication offices towards media advocacy and education of their members regarding broadcasting policy. The Catholic Communications Office of the U.S. Catholic Conference has listed media advocacy as one of its priorities. Donald Mathews, S.J., whose doctoral work in communications focused on broadcasting law and who formerly worked with the OC of the United Church of Christ has joined the U.S.C.C. as director of its media advocacy programme.

GREAT BRITAIN

It cannot be said that the churches in Britain have taken a sustained and well-thought-out position on the questions of national broadcasting policy. There is no organisation in Britain remotely comparable to the Office of Communication of the UCC in the United States. The British churches have preferred to seek to influence broadcasting by making representations to such bodies as the Annan Committee or by responding to what are seen as lapses in broadcasting standards of taste or decency. In addition, through the Central Religious Advisory Committee (CRAC), which advises the IBA and BBC, the churches influence policies on religious broadcasting.

It would be fair to say that the general approach of the churches in Britain has been to see broadcasting policy as primarily the concern of the broadcasters, except where 'religious' or 'moral' values are concerned. The churches do not have opinions on the setting up of a fourth TV channel, for instance, nor do they generally consider formally such questions as whether or not cable broadcasting is a good idea or how minority groups are treated by the media. Such questions are ones which are left to the informed consciences of individual Christians who have responsibility in such areas. It could be argued that the influence of a committed Catholic like the late Sir Charles Curran, BBC Director-General, 1969-1977, did more to bring Christian beliefs to bear on broadcasting policy than any organised lobby of Christians could have done. (See *TRENDS*, No.1 Spring, 1980 in which Curran's autobiography is reviewed).

At least one body of committed Christians in Britain would be highly sceptical about such claims of influence 'from within'. The National Viewers and Listeners Association inspired by Mrs Mary Whitehouse, if not composed entirely of Christians, is still the most obvious example of Christian concern with broadcasting policy. As Michael Tracey and David Morrison show in their recent book *Whitehouse* (London: Macmillan, 1979), the NVALA was born out of and is largely sustained by a desire 'to recolonise social life for God'. That is, the premise behind the NVALA's activities is that Christian beliefs and standards are being eroded by 'permissiveness' in broadcasting. In particular the home, last repository of God centred family life, is being invaded by television and radio programmes which undermine the very foundations of family life and thus of society in general.

There is much agreement with the NVALA from a wide variety of people and organisations over some of their specific concerns. Their interest in making the broadcasting organizations more accountable to the public, or worries about excessive violence in TV programmes, would find many allies. They stand alone, however, when they propose specific remedies for these problems which seem to assert that broadcasting policy should be subordinate to a particular Christian view of what is worthwhile and desirable.

The strategy of the NVALA is based on the premise that attack is the best means of defence. Should it be the strategy of the churches? The churches in Britain have yet to consider in a profound way the function and nature of the media in society, until they do it is likely that the instinctive response of many will be to see the media as a threat. It may be that moves in the Catholic Church towards the development of a national pastoral strategy will provide one context within which media and broadcasting policies could be fruitfully considered.

LATIN AMERICA

In the Latin American context there is not the same advocacy movement tradition found in countries such as the United States or Great Britain. Instead of pressing for the reform of the dominant media channels, the churches in Latin America have tended to mount alternative media forms to serve peasant and urban labouring groups. In both cases the aim of the Church is to help the poor, minorities, or other disadvantaged sectors to be better organised, to gain access to the media and establish their own internal, horizontal communication system.

Radio schools

A first type of alternative communication which the Church has itself developed is the local cultural-educational radio service. Catholic and Protestant churches have more than 250 radio stations, usually located in market towns and serving lower-status groups. There has been considerable research on radio schools (see the CSCC NEWSLETTER, Vol. 1, No. 1, Spring, 1979, the series preceding COMMUNICATION RESEARCH TRENDS). However, there is now increasing interest in the radio stations themselves as communication instruments in the hands of peasant and worker groups. In August, 1980 a first conference on "Regional Radio for Development in Latin America" sponsored by the Dutch overseas broadcasting service, was held at Bonaire, in the Dutch Antilles. Copies of the papers given may be obtained from Antonio Cabezas (Radio Nederland, P.O. Box 45, Bonaire, Nederlands Antilles).

Comunicación popular

A second type of alternative communications promoted by the churches in Latin America is what is referred to as "Comunicación Popular". This usually refers to the small scale, folk media which the people themselves produce: folk theatre, community newspapers, etc. The Comisión Evangélica Latino Americana de Educación Cristiana (CELADEC) (Av. General Garzón 2267, Apartado 3994, Lima, Peru) is a leading coordinating centre for research and action on Comunicación Popular in Latin America. CELADEC publishes a newsletter, CANAL, which carries current information on various centres in Latin America working with comunicación popular and notices of books, reports and studies on this subject. *Media Development*, the quarterly journal published by WACC (122 King's Road London SW3 4TR, England) brought out No. 3, 1980 on 'Comunicación popular' — a Latin American Model' with a series of articles describing a variety of experiences with this media form and training for the use of comunicación popular. Another centre of research and publication on comunicación popular is Diálogo Social in Panama (Apartado 9A-192, Panama). Herasto Reyes, Raúl Leis and Pablo de Arco have

published *Comunicación Popular: Teoría y Práctica*, 1976.

Similar to the media approaches of comunicación popular is that of group media or "medios grupales." A major centre for information on medios grupales is Centro Pellin (José Martínez-Terrero), (Ave. Monte Elena, EL PARAISO, Apartado 20133, Caracas (102), Venezuela).

Will the Church's Contribution be Significant?

If we are convinced by the conclusions of Rowland regarding the limitations of media reform movements, then we might be pessimistic about the impact of the Church's activity in this area. On the other hand some think that the churches are the principle support of media reform movements in various parts of the world and that they will make a major contribution to broadcasting policy. However, it is well to look squarely at what are likely to be the inherent weaknesses of the Church in this regard.

Reform groups tend to arouse public consciousness of a problem and suggest "reforms", but not fundamental changes which might affect significantly the power structure in a country. Often advocacy is concerned with problems that have arisen from a broadcasting system long in place. When the problems are finally noticed, it is too late or extremely difficult to make fundamental changes. It is necessary to be aware of the implications of a new technology in the very early stages of its introduction and plan then. Many of the minority groups that churches might support are not so much interested in changing the system as in getting access to the system. Once they achieve their ends, the pressure for change stops and they may even become exploiters of other minority groups.

Even if more radical changes are sought, this is usually accomplished by a long process of sustained action — something that volunteer groups find hard to do. New issues come up, the mood of the country changes and it is difficult to maintain interest. The churches are especially vulnerable in this respect because their membership cuts across class lines. Unless the Church has a solid theology which defines as one aspect of its mission contributing to the public welfare and challenging the concentration of social power, it is unlikely that it will sustain action. Individual Christians will consider their religion a purely individual affair and feel that their attitude toward national media policy has nothing to do with religion.

Many churches have a policy statement on the mass media, for example, the Catholic Church's *Communio et Progressio*. *Communio et Progressio* contains a fundamental theology of mass media which could provide a basis for the Church's contribution to broadcasting policy. But rarely are pastors aware of this theology of the media and they are in no position to help even those Christians who are actively involved in the media organisations to form their consciences on the basis of some Christian values. Moreover, a document such as *Communio et Progressio* is very general, and it takes a specific effort to relate this more concretely to broadcasting policy in a specific country.

If churches are going to participate in broadcasting policy making, then it is important that they have a comprehensive vision of what kind of broadcasting system is needed and how this vision fits in with the policy objectives of a coalition of similar groups. Otherwise the church represents just one more sectarian interest group with a piece of a policy that does not necessarily serve the common good.

Mass Media: social means to theological ends?

In January 1978 and again in January 1979, a small group of thirteen people, sociologists, theologians and a philosopher, met together at Blackfriars, Oxford, to discuss the relationship between sociology and theology. The fruits of their discussions are now available in book form as: *Sociology and Theology: Alliance and Conflict*, edited by David Martin, John Orme Mills and W.S.F. Pickering. (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1980).

The contributions to the book range widely over the problems of the interaction of two diverse, and often seemingly incompatible, disciplines. The chapters explore some of the conceptual problems which arise when sociologists and theologians seek to dialogue with each other.

God, Man and Media

Much the most interesting contribution from the point of view of those interested in communication is that of John Orme Mills, O.P., Councillor to the Master of the Dominican Order on the Means of Social Communication. He raises some fundamental questions in his chapter: "God, Man and Media: on a problem arising when theologians speak of the modern world".

Fr Mills builds his reflections around an analysis of the opening sentence of *Communio et Progressio*, "The unity and advancement of men living in society: these are the chief aims of social communication and of all the means it uses". It is likely, he says, that this statement, and others like it, will be taken as a sociological statement about the function of the mass media in society. Namely, that the media increase social cohesion and that this cohesion is beneficial. Unfortunately there is a little sociological evidence for such a point of view. Quite the contrary. Can we then say that this statement is simply poor sociology and quietly forget about it?

No, says Fr Mills, because this statement about the unifying function of the media is not sociological at all. It "is in fact a *theological statement*.... it contains no explicit reference to God or religion and seems merely to be making an observation on the way the media function in society; but it is a theological statement in the sense that it is a statement primarily attempting to project a view of part of the world from a 'standpoint 'outside' the world, and so is attempting to convey something about life's final meaning." The statement is "theology (perhaps quite good theology) with sociological trimmings."

The significance of this lies in the fact that such statements reveal how increasingly difficult it is "not to theologize in what are sociology's categories". It is recognized by Fr Mills that there can be no return to old world views and metaphysical assumptions that would allow theology to ignore sociology, but he does see the possibility that theology might be able to avoid being simply absorbed by sociology. By analysing the use of the term 'unity' in relation to the mass media he shows how a theological understanding of the concept is quite distinct from a sociological one.

Unity versus consensus

The sociologist is one who looks for patterns within society, patterns of social structures and changes within them, patterns that can be analysed, defined and explained in terms

of each other and of their past. The focus of such inquiry, according to Mills, is bound to be on similarities, on parallels, on what is classifiable and on the alike. The theologian on the other hand is charged with mediating a sense of the other, of what is not classifiable, of the unlike. And this mediating of 'otherness' is claimed to be *the* humanizing activity, that is the activity which brings the deepest understanding of what the proper relations between things really are. Only in relation to God, the wholly other, can human existence be seen in proper perspective. For the theologian, therefore, 'unity' has to be a dynamic concept, the growing into a right relation with God. This unity will have its horizontal dimension, the growth of fellowship among men. Such fellowship and unity will also entail that the diversity and variety of human life be allowed to flourish, for the 'unity' comes from human beings attaining their full statures as unique persons. Each makes a unique and personal contribution to the complete picture. In sociological terms, however, 'unity' is equivalent to consensus or conformity. Without the transcendent background diversity becomes the enemy of unity. Consensus is not a dynamic concept but a static one, the achievement of a state of 'sameness'.

Given these differences between the sociological and theological senses of the word 'unity', how far can one say that unity as a theological concept could or should be the proper end of the mass media? How can one judge if particular media policies are promoting 'unity' and not simply 'consensus'? It is conceivable that the church might have to oppose 'consensus' if this consensus was believed to violate the basic relations between men which make for 'unity'. The church in Latin America, to take only one example, has promoted alternative (different and distinct) patterns of community and media use opposing the ruling 'consensus'. It could even be claimed that the mass media, by their very nature, (they disseminate the same message at the same time everywhere) are never fitted to be instruments of this theologically understood unity.

Media policies and theology

There are no obvious answers to these questions raised by Fr Mills. But unless the churches consider the problems he touches on, especially the problem of distinguishing between sociological and theological categories, they are going to find it hard to play a truly creative role in the development of media policies. The churches will have to make determined efforts to understand what is their *distinctive* contribution to the debates on the place of communication in society. More, they will have to try and develop a 'unity' within the churches that encourages freedom, participation and diversity. A church which fails to relate its own theological insights to itself has little credibility as a critic of society's institutions.

Above all, the social policies of the churches need to be concerned to help individuals and communities find their own distinctive ways to reach for a more human life. Diversity can lead to conflict and some would shy away from that, but lack of open conflict often means the stifling of diversity in favour of a dead consensus. In sociological terms conflict needs to be managed, at the level of theology conflict is to be reconciled in favour of 'unity' in diversity. One should not be mistaken for the other.