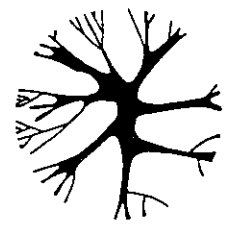


# RESEARCH TRENDS IN RELIGIOUS COMMUNICATION



## News in the Religious Media

The Christian churches have long been concerned with the problems raised by the ways in which the news media shape people's views of the world. Indeed, church media are often seen as being necessary to counter some of the views presented in the secular news media. In particular, the image of religion in the news is often felt to be seriously distorted.

However, before remedies can be found for these problems, several basic questions need to be faced.

Firstly, are religious news media needed at all? If they are, what should be their functions? How far are they to be directed primarily to the church-going, and how far to the general public? Are they to be publicity organs, teaching media, or solely purveyors of "hard news" with some editorial comment? Should church media seek to encourage debate and dialogue within their communities?

Secondly, what is known about the actual operations of church media? How far can the church press be seen as autonomous in relation to centres of power within the churches? It is possible to see the

church media as independent, a kind of religious "Fourth Estate"?

Thirdly, there are questions of objectivity. Is objectivity at present a goal of religious news media? Should it be? Can religiously committed journalists even claim to be objective? Should the church news media really seek to report church affairs precisely as the daily press reports society?

Finally, is there a future for the religious press? There is the practical problem of declining circulation of church newspapers and periodicals. The feeling is that the audience for church news is an increasingly elderly and limited one, and that church media report news in which few people are interested. What kind of news would attract new audiences? More particularly, what kind of news is it appropriate for church media to report?

Some of these questions are touched upon in the following article which tries to provide a context for religious news research by relating it to research on how the media help in the social construction of reality.

## Pictures in Our Heads: Media and Social Reality

*by William J. Thorn, Ph.D, Institute of the Catholic Press, Marquette University, Milwaukee, United States.*

The power of media in modern society to shape the public mind and develop public opinion in the political arena prompted Walter Lippmann to explore the issue by analysing the difference between external reality and the image of it which people carry in their heads. In a world, "out of reach, out of sight, and out of mind,"<sup>1</sup> he observed, the media play a major role in structuring the pictures in our heads which constitute personal reality. It is on the pictures rather than on external reality, he argued, that people base their behaviour and attitudes. In a summary of mass communication research, DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach concluded, "Dependency on media information is an ubiquitous condition of modern society."<sup>2</sup> In this dependency, individuals rely on media to define a complex world, to provide a means to act meaningfully in it, and to escape from it in fantasy. McLuhan carried the concept one step further in declaring that the medium itself was the message and the reality, restructuring even the basic thought process.

### Journalists As Constructors of Reality

Over the last fifteen years a number of researchers have begun to study how the media create social reality. These studies,

loosely grouped under the heading, social construction of reality, chiefly concern themselves with the pressures which shape media content: professional, institutional, conceptual, and personal. For example, a major point of concern is the way news is defined. The units and points of analysis differ among the various works. Some look at newspaper newsrooms, others at national newsmagazines or network television news, another at the production of a series of documentaries. That there is a multi-national dimension poses much less concern. In aggregate, these various studies significantly consider the shaping of pictures in our heads by the media.

Everette Dennis in 1978 summarized the present work on the effects of mass-mediated information by noting the rise of concern for indirect effects through study of cognitive, affective, and behavioral approaches in the wake of twenty years of failure with examination of direct, group behaviour effects. Dennis (1981) concluded that the shift to indirect effects appears in research following modelling theory and meaning theory.<sup>3</sup>

Modelling theory developed from Bandura's social learning theory in which he posited that viewers learn specific ways of

behaving from actors and that under certain conditions they will imitate the behaviour which they observe.<sup>4</sup>

Meaning theory includes social reality. The approach used in social construction of reality studies is that of Berger and Luckmann.<sup>5</sup> These authors approach social reality from the sociology of knowledge, wherein institutions maintain and transmit knowledge; individuals develop a personal reality which is reshaped through encounters with society's institutions and significant others, leading to a balance between objective and subjective reality. It is this concept which makes news and news media so central a concern for many of these researchers, for the news media define reality in a powerful, direct, and virtually unassailable fashion.

Another research approach important to these studies is that of socialization and professionalization. Researchers have studied how media reshape the norms, attitudes, and the perceptions of those who work within them. A study of American journalists in 1975 tried to discern precisely who the reporters and editors were.<sup>6</sup> It concluded that by most indicators the journalists were quite unlike the average American citizen: better educated, more affluent, higher in social status, more iconoclastic, less religious, at least in formal membership, and more liberal. They were also overwhelmingly white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant. These considerations became of greater concern when the norms of the profession of communication compound the individual differences by putting premium emphasis on slick production at the expense of understanding.

### Impact of News on Religious Values

Taken together, these various approaches merge in the recent spate of studies classed as "social construction of reality." One of the earliest, and perhaps the broadest in approach, was a participant observer study by Philip Elliott in 1972 of the production of a series of British Associated Television (ATV) programmes dealing with prejudice. By looking at the production as a social process in which the programme producers were seen as the products of several social contexts, Elliott was able to convey the complexity of the relationship between media and society as it operates through professional communicators working as a team on a particular project. In this approach the influence of several pressures is evident — the examples chosen, the research not done, the sources not selected — particularly when they are related to the professional norm of keeping the attention of the largest possible audience. The professional communicator affects religious broadcasting by trying to shape it to fit a mass audience even when it is intended for a minority audience, for example, by blurring significant distinctions, avoiding divisive topics and emphasizing the mass appeal elements. Elliott's approach differs from the earlier approaches in that he sees the professionals not as passive gatekeepers nor as persuaders but as intermediaries between society as source and society as audience. He argues that the public has become less a partner in a communication process than "mere media markets", that those concerned primarily with content will not gain ready access to the media, and that media will support the status quo.<sup>7</sup>

American research on social construction of reality has been dominated by concern about news media and their ability to shape public perception of events. Like Elliott's work, this research concentrates on the professional in his workplace, and most are participant observer studies. Together these works indicate that reality, insofar as it is projected in the news media, is constructed in accordance with rules which journalists are socialized to recognize.

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### Who Forms The Audience for Religious News?

Michael Novak observed that "television shapes the soul's geography,"<sup>8</sup> not only by the content which it provides as a form of reality but also by the very way in which it tutors viewers to expect information to be packaged. While the several studies of news operations provide great insight into the production of information, it is the link between content and audience that remains greatly unexplored.

Several research approaches concerned with the media audience offer some assistance to producers concerned with knowing their audience. These studies with a psychological approach look primarily to the salience which various content has for the individual members of the audience, the uses to which various content and the several media are put, and the gratifications which users derive from the content to which they attend. Griffin in 1979 studied the audience of a diocesan newspaper and found that its potential readers, particularly the younger ones, were looking for an approach to the Church as an institution almost the direct opposite of the one provided — the one which satisfied the elderly readers.<sup>9</sup> Knowing such audience traits helps the editor decide how to construct the product. It is this line of research, yet wholly undeveloped for the religious communicator, which will bridge the gap between content and society as audience, and which should precede production in order to assure that the message reaches the intended audience.

Scotton and Thorn<sup>10</sup> studied religious journalists as professionals and found that regardless of background or previous experience, journalists in the Catholic press strongly adopted the norms of their secular peers. Thorn and Clem<sup>11</sup> found that bishops with some journalistic experience viewed media more as editors than as bishops. This suggests not only that Church personnel with media experience begin to develop professional norms, but also that they prize more greatly the role of communications within the Church community. Perhaps they recognize more clearly that the main effect of the Church media is to present social reality in a way congruent with the reality posed by other media, particularly secular media, but differing in the Christian impulse and orientation. These people, it appears, recognize that media are better used to explore issues than to ignore them.

### Implications of Research for Religious Media

Several significant conclusions of concern to religious communicators may be extrapolated from these studies.

1. Social reality, while a slippery research term, reflects concern and belief that media affect society by helping shape personal perception of reality which is reality for most people.

2. Mass-mediated information, while not all-powerful, may have long-term and subtle effects by providing models of behaviour and distinctively different meanings through its portrayals, fictional or documentary.
3. Modelling behaviour assumes that the viewer identifies with the character, finds comparable situations in which to use the behaviour and is rewarded for a long term effect but not for a single incident.
4. Media provide a form of social reality which cannot be ignored, but which may be reshaped by interaction with previous beliefs and values, alternative media portrayals, and significant others.
5. Institutional pressures powerfully affect professional communications and communicators through socialization, partially shaping the way the world is perceived and reported. Professional concern for style and appeal to audience attention seem to make ideas count for less.
6. As a commercial medium, television constantly seeks mass rather than minority audiences, even when relatively direct access is provided to religious communicators, so that professionals will tend to play up the mass appeal and non-divisive or non-controversial elements. This means that a mass medium may, for control reasons, be less useful for reaching specific audiences with a particular message or approach.
7. Media, particularly televised, portrayals of topics and issues may so shape the view of society that evangelization and religious communication will best proceed within the styles and approaches set by the mass media professionals, including advertisers.
8. Very little social reality research on the media concerns itself with the question of which images and symbols are being presented in a religious context.

These conclusions must be combined with some observations about directions for more study valuable for religious communications. The overwhelming portion of the work in this area deals with news. While important, news is both too narrow and too broad. Little attention is paid to religious news within the broad news context, particularly to attitudes within news institutions towards religion and religious news. Common wisdom holds that religious news ranks low for several reasons: potential divisiveness and controversy, low estimation among journalists concerned with significant topics like politics, and perhaps personal attitudes toward formal religion and lack of interest for the audience. News is also too narrow because portrayal of religion and religious people and ideas in non-news media content moulds social reality no less significantly.

More importantly, religious communicators need a better understanding of the audiences to which they would direct their messages. Elliott correctly sees communicators as mediators between society as audience and society as source. Without strong evidence about the salience of various aspects of religious programming, the uses to which content and media are put among potential viewers or readers, and the gratifications which the audience derives or might derive, the religious communicator must guess — an expensive proposition in broadcasting. Unlike the communication in Hyde Park which provides instant feedback, modern communicators send messages into the void and measure feedback, if at all, by ratings — hardly a measure of what view of reality emerged from the content.

In this era, much research begs to be done on the religious aspects of media use, salience and gratification. We know little about the interaction between religious communication,

secular communication, and significant others like parents, friends, teachers, pastors, or bishops. Even less do we know how media portrayals interact with other sources of religious formation. Religious imagery, to be sure, develops out of particular cultural contexts. Yet personal development of imagery in dialogue with mass-mediated imagery merits study. A study of the models of religious behaviour and of the meanings and symbols offered by major television programming would be a good first step towards understanding. While we know little of the extent to which televised characters constitute reality for viewers, we do know CBS quit portraying impoverished characters in its soap operas because it was receiving too many packages of food and clothing for these fictional people.<sup>12</sup> How does Christianity fare in the soap operas? What alternative models might be produced?

### Religious Communication: An Unexplored Area

Finally, the communication of the Church — both between different communities and from within to the outside — seems insufficiently examined in the light of contemporary knowledge about media and communication. Effective religious communication will depend for its success both on the authority granted to professional communicators supportive of religion in the popular media and on the attention given to contemporary understanding of media. Professionals know how to produce; solid audience research can help define what to produce to communicate specific ideas. Significantly, only one member of the Pontifical Commission for Social Communication has a media background. Of equal significance is the state of formal education offered to seminarians and to clergy, whose faithful swim in a mass media sea. Only now is a survey of communication programmes in Catholic institutions being done. Mastery of effective mass media communication will require as much understanding and skill as was once required in oratory and literature.

DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach concluded that mass-mediated information affects beliefs and values not by creating them but by putting them in conflict with situations which "clarify" them. Dennis noted that media can establish, extend, substitute, and stabilize personal constructions of reality under differing conditions. How this works for religious media and with religious messages, how it operates on religious reality for society, set a major research agenda. But the path has been blazed in several areas. Children's Television Workshop understands how to use television to teach elementary concepts to young children. Studies of media and alcohol use are opening up understanding of the interaction between media and adults.<sup>13</sup> Research tells us that media content is but one factor, albeit a powerful one, in creating personal images of reality. In looking to mass media, particularly broadcasting, for education, evangelization, and reinforcement of a real image of the Christian message, we need considerable research on the religious pictures which mass media put in people's heads.

1 Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Free Press, 1965) p.18

2 Melvin DeFleur and Sandra Ball-Rokeach, *Theories of Mass Communication* (New York: Longman, 1975) p.261

3 Everette E. Dennis, Arnold Ismach and Donald Gillmore, *Enduring Issues in Mass Communication* (St. Paul, MN.: West Publishing, 1978)

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4 Albert Bandura, *Social Learning Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1977)

5 Peter L. Berger and T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Doubleday, 1966)

6 John Johnstone, Edward Slawski and William Bowman, *Newspeople* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1976)

7 Philip Elliott, *The Making of a Television Series: A Case Study in the Sociology of Culture* (London: Constable, 1972) p. 165

8 Michael Novak, "Television Shapes the Soul" in *Television as a Social Force* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1975) p. 10. Novak, a philosopher, argues that the daily increment of the mind comes from viewing and that the shaping takes place over time.

9 Robert Griffin, "Information Seeking and Usage by Milwaukee Area Catholics" in *The Future of the Catholic Press* (Milwaukee, WI: Institute of the Catholic Press, Marquette University, 1979)

10 James Scotton and William Thorn, "The Journalists in the Catholic Press

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11 William Thorn and Chris Clem, *Bishop-publishers and Editors of the Catholic Press*, unpublished manuscript.

12 Edward J. Epstein, *News From Nowhere* (New York: Random House, 1973)

13 See, for example, Shearon Lowery, *Soap and Booze in the Afternoon: An Analysis of the Portrayals of Alcohol Use in the Daytime Television Serial*, Ph.D. thesis, Washington State University, 1979, and Barry D. Daudill and G. Alan Marlatt, "Modelling Influences in Social Drinking: An Experimental Analog", *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, Vol. 43, p. 405-415

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