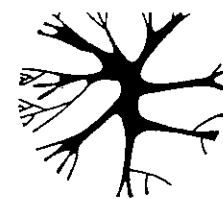


# RESEARCH TRENDS IN RELIGIOUS COMMUNICATION



## The Church Faces Videotext

The Church frequently becomes aware of the importance of new communication technologies only long after such technologies are introduced. By then the organization of the format and content of the technologies may be set in ways that are antithetical to the gospel. Telematics, in such forms as viewdata and teletext, may find the church better prepared.

## How Can the Church Use Videotex?

The rapid development of interactive videotex (viewdata) and broadcast videotex (teletext) systems in recent years has prompted some churches to begin investigating how such systems could be used to provide church-related information. In Europe there are several experiments which are being developed at present though up to now there has been little contact between church groups in different countries.

A first step towards bringing such groups together to share information and exchange experiences was made recently when the CSCC and *Projekt Bildschirmtext in München* of the German Bishops' Conference, co-hosted an informal seminar entitled *Videotex and the Church*. Held in Munich between May 17th and 19th it brought together participants from a number of countries. The German Church was represented by Mgr. Wilhelm Schätzler and Sr. Gerburg Vogt, Austria by Mr. Schneider-Schwarzbauer, Switzerland by Fr. Karl Weber, S.J., France by Mr Patrick De Boisfosse and Fr. Pierre Toutain. From England came Canon Maurice Simmons, an Anglican, and representing the United States Catholic Conference, Fr. James Schifano,

S.C.J.. Unda International was represented by Mr. Jacques Dessaucy.

This initial meeting revealed a great desire for further contact and for mutual assistance in designing and evaluating videotex information services. It also revealed that each country had a very special approach to videotex. The following pages reveal some of the different approaches possible to the church in using videotex.

It is hoped that the initial meeting will be followed by others, probably on an annual basis. The initial group includes those who are already heavily engaged in videotex services, like the German Church, and those from countries like the U.S. which are only beginning to develop systems. The CSCC is anxious to hear from other churches experimenting with or considering videotex services so that a truly international church information network can be established. People wishing to become part of such a network or seeking further information should contact Jim McDonnell at the CSCC.

## Germany: Church Experiments with Viewdata

The German Catholic Church has taken the lead in exploring possibilities for church use of interactive videotex (viewdata). Since March 1978, the *Projekt Bildschirmtext in München*, under the direction of Sr. Gerburg Vogt, SAC, has been taking part in viewdata field trials.

*Bildschirmtext*, the German viewdata system, has been undergoing field trials from 1978 under the auspices of the German postal administration. In the beginning, 240 institutions, including the Catholic Church, were given the chance to experiment with the system on a non-public basis. These early trials ended in September 1979.

In May 1980, 400 additional institutions joined the trial programme and public trials took place in West Berlin and Düsseldorf. In 1983, it is hoped to add Stuttgart and Hamburg to the test areas.

So far, the Church has contributed a total of 3,000 pages of information, divided into various categories. In fact, the

Church is one of the largest private institutional participants in the *Bildschirmtext* system. This is, in large part, due to the fact that the Church in Germany considers the viewdata programme important and has encouraged Sr. Vogt to work full time in the design of the software. Sr. Vogt, with two office staff persons and wide cooperation in the German Catholic Church is constantly working to develop new information services. About 5,000-6,000 requests for pages of Church information are made each month.

### Church Uses of Viewdata

Examples of the kinds of information available are: details of parish services, information on specialised Church organizations like MISSIO or MISEREOR, and details of services provided by a wide range of Catholic official and private organizations, e.g. caritas, youth groups, etc.

A major category of information relates to Catholic social services. It is claimed that by using Bildschirmtext, previously hard to find information of a practical nature can be made available quickly and easily. For example, a person in Munich wishing to find out what church social services are available for the elderly in Berlin simply requests the appropriate Bildschirmtext pages for social services in the Diocese of West Berlin.

There he will find information about old people's homes, nursing homes, activities and organizations for the elderly, etc. This kind of information could be very valuable for a range of people from social workers and priests to people intending to move house and wishing to know what services a new area has to offer.

The main advantages of Bildschirmtext for this kind of information are four.

1. Access to current, accurate information. Unlike a printed directory, Bildschirmtext can be updated on a daily, weekly or monthly basis.
2. Access to a data base containing current information from a wide variety of sources — but only one information source, Bildschirmtext, needs to be consulted by the user.
3. Bildschirmtext offers maximum anonymity and privacy to those looking for information. The person looking for counselling services can do so without revealing to anyone their interest. For the person seeking information on the Catholic Church, for example, Bildschirmtext avoids the possible embarrassment of face-to-face contact.
4. Bildschirmtext is easy to use in that the user does not have to leave the home. The ordinary TV set will display the information required within seconds.

#### Location of "Church" in Viewdata

Before Bildschirmtext was set up the German postal administration formed a working party of potential information providers to discuss the ways in which information would be displayed, categorized and made accessible to the user. The initial sorting of information to be provided into broad categories reflected the heavily commercial orientation of the working party. The interests of non-commercial organizations, like the churches, unions and consumer associations were not adequately represented or understood. For example, Church information was categorized under the general heading of canon law! The danger of this was that church information would be placed in one very narrowly defined sub-category, and that the range of church activities and services would be only brought to the attention of the committed churchgoer.

To counter such narrow categorization and to introduce a concept of public service into Bildschirmtext development, the Church formed a small working group. One result of its efforts through this new group was that 3 out of the 8 main categories of information offered by Bildschirmtext are explicitly non commercial. These are category 3, Counsel, Aid, Consumer Information; category 5, State, Political Parties, Churches, Organizations and category 7, Education, Knowledge and Culture.

For the Church itself an initial question was, should it begin by offering information about its beliefs and teachings or about its public service activities? In line with its desire to have some information services on Bildschirmtext recognized as public services (and thus to be offered freely to all users) the church decided to concentrate on giving information on its welfare, social and educational services.

This public service philosophy meant also that church

**The Zentralstelle Medien of the German Bishops' Conference, directed by Mgr. Wilhelm Schätzler, contracted Sr. Dr. Gerburg Vogt, SAC, to oversee the Projekt Bildschirmtext in München. The project is coordinated from offices in Munich, and the Diocese of West Berlin and the Deanery of Düsseldorf each have an editor and a secretary for inputting local information. Information about the project can be obtained from Sr. Vogt at her office, Kaulbachstrasse 31, 8000 Munich 22, West Germany.**

related information can be found by the user who looks up categories other than Church. For example, a sub-category of the main division, Counsel, Aid, Consumer Information is Care of the Family, Youth, Elderly. By accessing this sub-category the user will find that the church is a provider of information on such welfare services. In a similar fashion a user looking for information on schools for his children would find church schools listed and briefly described under the general category for education. Thus the user is made aware that the church is an institution actively seeking to meet a variety of real human and social needs.

A problem at the moment is discovering which information services are of most value to users. It was quickly realised that pages of parish information were relatively little used, perhaps because such information was already easily available, but it is very difficult to find out which services would have greatest appeal.

#### Who Uses Bildschirmtext?

Sometimes services are unexpectedly successful. An example is the daily 'calendar' page which gives brief information about the saint being commemorated that day in the liturgy, as well as the references to the appropriate liturgical texts. Why this service should appear to be used so much is not entirely clear — is this information difficult to get elsewhere?

Trying to discover what information is really needed by users is hampered by the fact that the public trials are being conducted among relatively few households, 3000 each in Dusseldorf and Berlin. As Bildschirmtext gradually becomes a national service it may be possible to obtain a more broadly based picture of what different classes and categories of information users require and need.

This need to know the user will be even more acute as the Church attempts to provide pages of information on matters of basic Catholic belief. What strategy of presentation ought to be adopted in order to present the faith intelligibly to the curious or questioning user?

#### Does Viewdata Degrade the Church?

The Church's involvement with Bildschirmtext raises some important questions about the impact of such media on social and human values. The Protestant Churches in Germany for the most part have tended to regard Bildschirmtext as a system which encourages the fragmentation of communities and reinforces the isolation of the individual. In addition, they fear that the strong commercial orientation of viewdata (it is likely to be first of all a business information and advertising medium), could push the Church into "selling" religion. One has only to think of the way in which religion is promoted by the "electric church" in broadcasting.

The German Catholic Church, however, while recognising these objections and dangers, sees Bildschirmtext in

much more positive terms. Yes, Bildschirmtext could contribute to reinforcing individual isolation, but on the other hand it can provide welcome privacy and anonymity. Furthermore, if the information offered by the Church answers a person's needs and opens up new possibilities for action, participation, or even belief, Bildschirmtext will be a force against isolation.

As for "selling" religion — participation in Bildschirmtext at the outset *when the uses of videotext are being defined* gives the Church a chance to influence the medium's development. The Church has an opportunity to provide a wide range of information, news and opinion which does not insult the dignity of the user by trying to manipulate. The Church's aim throughout must be to open up new

possibilities for the user, inviting feedback and comment.

Above all, Bildschirmtext offers the Church a chance to be at the heart of a new information dissemination process. It can experiment with the new medium, try out different ways of presenting itself and its work to a mass audience. It can also (and probably will) experiment with closed-user groups providing specific information to limited groups of subscribers. One institution very interested in this possibility is the Catholic Press Agency (KNA).

In the end, the Church's user of Bildschirmtext will be as successful as the *quality* of the information it provides and the manner in which it is presented. Who knows what possible new uses of viewdata will arise in the future? The Church should be engaged in shaping those possibilities.

## Great Britain: Exploring Christian Belief

In 1974, the North-East Ecumenical Group, a body bringing together leaders in all the churches in the north-east of England, established the Churches' Regional Broadcasting Council to monitor the churches' involvement in broadcasting.

### Christian Reflections on Teletext

The Council took a keen interest in the development of teletext (broadcast videotext) and since October 1978 has been supplying information for the BBC Ceefax service. Initially, this took the form of reflections on Bible passages, because of limited funds, but more resources would allow further experiments, including, for example, a Christian commentary on current affairs. The original BBC service continued until March 1980 when regional groups throughout the country took responsibility for supplying scripts for both the Ceefax service and the commercial broadcasting companies' (ITV) Oracle system. Each service has an editor, appointed by the churches and material is made available by the regional groups to the two editors who submit it to the broadcasting authorities. The Ceefax daily page is called "Christian Comment" and the Oracle page "Forethought".

### A Christian Viewdata Service?

In conjunction with Canon Stephen Sykes, Professor of Theology in the University of Durham, and Dr. John Hawgood, Director of the University Computer Unit, the Council in 1979 began to study the Christian possibilities of viewdata. Three main areas were identified for Christian applications:

1) factual information about the churches; 2) a service to individuals needing help; 3) an exploration of Christian beliefs.

Several members of the new Viewdata Advisory Group, led by Canon Maurice Simmons, with a small grant from the North-East Ecumenical Group, began designing viewdata "pages." An experimental sequence of pages is now available on Prestel system of the British Post Office, but not publicly announced.

### "Search": A Viewdata Dialogue

This experimental sequence under the title *Search: Exploring Christian Faith* was first entered into Prestel in April 1980. After discussion of the first 12 frames produced, a second sequence of 16 pages was entered in July 1980. These are now nationally available.

*Search* attempts to interest a thoughtful enquirer in the

possibility of the existence of God and acceptance of belief and, as in a programmed education text, offer the user a choice of a limited number of possible responses. Thus page 1 of *Search* asks "Is it reasonable for us to believe in a God who created us and all things? If the user thinks it unreasonable he is invited to press zero on his control keypad. This brings another page onto the TV screen which asks "If we cannot believe in God, can we explain the experience of love, order, beauty and "belonging" that most people have?". Again the user can respond and continue the "dialogue". This sequence is an attempt to exploit the interactive nature of the medium to challenge the user to think about certain fundamental questions. It is not purely an information service.

Further pages are suggested in the present series, based upon: The Old Testament, The Person of Jesus Christ, The Holy Spirit and The human response to God. In addition it is anticipated that the system could be used —

- a) To explore the meaning of Christian concepts — e.g. Salvation, Forgiveness, Prayer, Reconciliation .....
- b) To explain and report on activities within the life of the Church e.g. Ecumenism, Evangelism, Marriage and Baptism policy, Social Responsibility issues etc.
- c) To provide a reference for people requiring help or advice in meeting various human conditions, crises, problems etc. e.g. Death, Marriage, Divorce, Anxiety, Loneliness etc.
- d) To collate statistics and reference information.

### The Durham Viewdata Project

Recently the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK), an Anglican missionary society which engages extensively in publishing, has given a grant to the North-East Ecumenical Group and Durham University to explore the use of viewdata for Christian information and education. It is hoped to appoint a Research Fellow soon to direct the project over the next three years. The objective is to institute a public service on Prestel. Accordingly, therefore, the first task of the project will be to identify the questions about Christian beliefs most likely to be in the minds of Prestel subscribers both present and future. The aim is to provide the subscribers with an "easy way in" to deeper exploration.

The second main task will be to investigate and test various ways of structuring the interactive sessions between the subscriber and Prestel. These "field trials" will begin from each type of question identified and end with the

motivation it is hoped will encourage the user to follow up indicated avenues for further exploration through other media or personal contact.

The designers of the project are very conscious of the need to create a service which maintains a balance between Prestel's main advantage and its main disadvantage. The advantage lies in its individual impact and privacy. It allows the users to select information which can be displayed on the screen at any one time. The Durham Viewdata Project will therefore be striving to provide an information service in which the content and the graphic display will be of the highest quality.

Further information can be obtained from Canon Maurice Simmons, The Rectory, Croxdale, Durham, (from July: The Vicarage, Norton, Stockton-on-Tees, Cleveland).

## France: First Steps of the Church

The French Direction Générale des Télécommunications (DGT) is planning a trial of its viewdata system, Télétel, at Versailles Vélizy, from October 1981 to December 1982. Vélizy was chosen because it has a new telephone network which will avoid certain technical difficulties. Its disadvantage is that its population is not representative of the general population.

Only 2,500 telephone subscribers will be given Télétel terminals although as of January 1st 1981, the DGT had received 7,800 requests to participate! The population making these requests is described as being overwhelmingly male, aged 35 to 65, active, living in separate houses and having at least four members of the household. They were also overwhelmingly from the professional and middle classes. The DGT has then analysed the responses to produce a sample user population of 1,500 people who will be 23.33% from professional classes and 13.33% working class, 65% aged 35 to 65. Another 1,000 users will be chosen with the needs of the information providers in mind.

### Participation of the Church

Among the information providers (IPS) will be the French Catholic Church. The French episcopate, through the Federation des Organismes de Communication Sociale (FOCS) has reserved 120 pages. The Teletel organization has offered in addition 10 pages as other IPS as well as 10 pages for each of the parishes in the experimental zone. Technical expertise is being provided by the Catholic publishers, Bayard Presse, who are also interested in this.

Before participating in the experiment the Church surveyed the attitudes of potential users in the designated Télétel region. It was discovered that the Church would not suffer in public estimation by participating. In addition, it seemed that many people thought that a Télétel system might be able to provide them with answers to certain basic human questions — about life, death, the meaning of life etc. There was a positive enthusiasm about exploring such topics through an anonymous medium like videotex. The Church was thus sufficiently encouraged to believe that providing information on Télétel could meet some real human needs.

### Church Information Themes

The results of the survey encouraged the Church team to consider providing Church related information around certain key themes. Finally six main information services were provided by the Church. These are 1) The events of life

2) Religious news and events 3) Prayer 4) Culture and recreation 5) Parishes and 6) Letters (a message service).

The user is led to these services by accessing the general category Catholic church or by means of certain key words to be found in the Télétel index of subjects, e.g. Religion, Paroisse, Priere, Foi etc. Unlike the German Church's approach, therefore, the French information is concentrated in a single category.

Under the first five categories the user will find various sub-groupings. The events of life, for example, include birth, education, marriage, retreats, illness, mourning. This is an attempt to provide information related to universal human problems and situations — to meet people's very deepest needs. In these categories the user will find both information and directions on who can be contacted for further help or advice. Sub-themes under the heading Prayer are: Why pray?; the mass; the Virgin Mary and the saints; group prayer and aids to prayer. In the cultural category the user finds recommendations on which books to read, films or TV to watch and radio programmes to listen to. Under Parishes local parishes supply information about their services and activities.

### Communication via Télétel

The Letters category is seen as potentially very important. This is a means by which users can type messages for the information providers and input them into the Télétel system. There is also the potential for users to send messages to each other if they know the proper 'address' of their correspondents Télétel terminal. The message-sending capability is possible because, unlike Prestel (the British system) or Bildschirmtext, ordinary users will have a typewriter type keyboard to input data into the system. The message service offers a chance of instant feedback to the provider of information and a means of allowing the user to communicate and interact with others independent of the information provider. Télétel could become a communication as well as an information system.

The FOCS Télétel team is very conscious of certain key constraints on the kind of service they can offer. Firstly, it is difficult to know exactly what kind of services the public really need. It is especially difficult to know how to serve the needs of the non-practising Catholic or those with little or no religious beliefs. Secondly, how can the dozen or so lines of text of 40 characters each, which is all that can be displayed on the TV screen, be used to give information on complex topics. Conciseness, accuracy and interest are all demanded. Thirdly, the limitations on the amount of information which can be displayed and the lack of dialogue with the system mean that the user should be encouraged to seek further information (if necessary) from suitably qualified people. The Télétel system should encourage further human contact. Reliance on the machine is too limiting. Finally, the image of the Church presented via Télétel should be one of openness and responsiveness to people's needs and questions. It should not dispense information as if it were nothing but a large bureaucracy.

Another problem is how to inform the public that such a new form of information is being offered. Announcements in parish bulletins will not reach the lapsed or indifferent. How is the team to know if their information is meeting user's needs or which pages are being accessed most often?

The Télétel team led by Pierre Virlet is exploring these and other questions and looking for ideas and suggestions. His office is at FOCS, 193 rue de l'Université, 7500 PARIS.