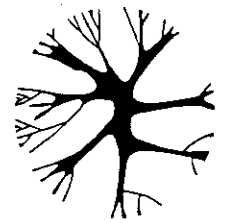


RESEARCH TRENDS IN RELIGIOUS COMMUNICATION



Vol. 3 (1982), No. 1

Church Responses to Cable Television

Today the Church is increasingly aware that new communication technologies like videotex, satellites and cable are posing new challenges and opening up new opportunities for pastoral work and evangelization. How should the church respond to these new media? This supplement explores that question by looking at church attitudes to the uses of cable TV in three countries. In Germany the Catholic Church is experimenting with cable, in Britain the churches are beginning to formulate a policy towards cable, and in the United States the churches have been trying to use cable constructively for some years. This limited survey of activity shows that the churches have much to share in ideas and experience on an international level. It is hoped this will be a small contribution to that sharing.

Germany: First Steps of the Church in Cable

The German Catholic Church and the Evangelical Church have both expressed interest in participating in one of the four experimental cable projects now being run by West German state governments: that at Ludwigshafen just south of Mannheim. There are also pilot projects at Munich, Dortmund and Berlin. The Ludwigshafen project is the most advanced and an Anstalt für Kabelkommunikation (Cable Communication Institute) has just been set up to plan and coordinate the system. It will evaluate programmes and organise the overall schedule.

At present it is intended to cable about 30,000 households, and perhaps 24 to 30 channels will be available. It is planned to retransmit many existing broadcast TV channels as well as supply innovative services like teletext (Videotext) and viewdata (Bildschirmtext). Various commercial interests, newspaper groups and several US companies including Warner Communications are actively expressing interest. The project should be operational in 1984.

Why Church Interest in Cable TV?

So far under the leadership of Fr Karl Weich, S.J., it is the Catholic Church that has the most developed church strategy for using cable. At the beginning of 1982 he set out four main reasons for involving the church in using cable TV. First, the church can extend its *internal communication* in new ways. Second, the church could have *access to people* whom it has not been able to contact through community or the press. Third, the church has a new opportunity to put itself in the *public eye*. Fourth, the church at the *local level* has a chance to speak. Above all the church seeks to put this new medium at the service of the church's mission by creative programming.

Essentially a Local Medium

Weich sees the strength and opportunity of cable tv in its localness. The church is not going to imitate the forms of national broadcasting, nor is it seeking to reach an elite audience.

No, the church will attempt to make programmes with the cooperation and participation of local people which will speak to them of their everyday lives and doings.

Programming principles

The objectives of the church involvement are expressed very clearly in principles underlying proposed programming. First, the *localness* is stressed. Second, programmes are to be made *with* and *not about* local people. Third, the programmes should *reach out to non-church-goers*. Finally, the programmes must be avowedly Catholic.

The cable project team is looking to translate these principles into actual programmes under the following four headings: *The Church Speaks*, *The Church Listens*, *The Church Helps*, and *The Church Points Out*.

The Church Speaks: this is the easiest programme area. Local and international church news, explaining the position of the church on various matters, and presenting Catholic beliefs. *The Church Listens*: probably the most difficult area of programming. Here programmes attempt to grapple with current problems and questions in an effort to explore the issues in a non-dogmatic way.

An important problem is how to devise ways for viewers to engage in dialogue with the programme-makers. How, too, to discover what are the issues that people would like to have programmes on. *The Church Helps*: this has two main thrusts. In the first place the church tries to make programmes that will answer pastoral and social needs. The programmes would be seen as working in collaboration with established church agencies e.g. church welfare services. Secondly, the programmes will speak up for those who cannot help themselves or speak for themselves. The Church as voice of the voiceless. *The Church Points Out*: it is not enough for the Church to criticize injustice or to speak against current morality or denounce sin. It must also inspire people and one way of doing so is to make

programmes that show there are other more satisfying ways of living. Documentaries on outstanding people like Mother Teresa present alternative models. Another important task is to recall and re-present the past. People are interested in their roots, and programmes can be made that look again at past social, cultural, community and religious customs and traditions. They may merit reviving.

Present Plans

At the moment the church project team is preparing for the 1984 start of the project by testing out many of their early ideas. In the first instance it is necessary to recruit creative and committed lay volunteers and train them. There is also a great need to alert the leaders and pastors of the local church to the opportunity that cable TV can give them to extend their local mission. As for the programming, much work has to be done to discover what are the most effective and acceptable forms of presentation. Various programmes are to be produced and shown to groups of viewers for their reactions. Finally, a start is being made to tap the memories of older citizens as a part of the process of exploring the local past.

The Significance of the Ludwigshafen Project

The Ludwigshafen project has been reported at some length because at present it is probably the most serious attempt of the church in Europe to formulate a response to cable TV. The German Catholic Church has already shown in its willingness to explore the possibilities of viewdata (Bildschirmtext)¹ that it is conscious of the church's responsibility to make its voice heard in the debate on the development of new communication

media. The Ludwigshafen project takes church involvement a step further. In many countries there is still time for the church and other public interest bodies to contribute to the shaping of technologies like cable and viewdata. If the church does not contribute, these media will be shaped overwhelmingly by commercial and political interests. The church can and should speak up for the public interest.

The objectives of the Ludwigshafen project indicate that the church is not thinking in narrow ecclesiastical terms. It is not to be a mini "electronic church"; it is not going to ape the styles and formats of commercial professional broadcasting. Its emphasis on the local possibilities of the medium means that the church is contributing to the search to find alternative, community based media.

The possibilities of engaging in similar cable experiments are unlikely to be open to many churches. But as cable TV expands, the churches should be thinking about how they can best contribute to its development. If they follow Ludwigshafen, they will begin by recognising that cable offers the local churches the challenge and opportunity to rethink their present pastoral, evangelistic, and communicative priorities.

For further information about the Ludwigshafen project contact Fr. Karl Weich, S.J., Projekt Kablefernsehen, Heinrich Pesch Haus, Frankenthalerstrasse 229, D-6700 Ludwigshafen, West Germany.

1. Cf. The Religious Supplement to *COMMUNICATION RESEARCH TRENDS*, Vol. 2(1981), No.1, "The Church Faces Videotext", where a description of the German Bildschirmtext Project is given.

Great Britain: First Thoughts on Cable Policies

The churches in Britain have recently had to begin to work out their attitude to probable cable expansion. In March 1982 the government set up a committee under Lord Hunt to inquire into cable expansion and broadcasting policy. It is to report by the end of September. Given such a limited timescale the Hunt Committee moved quickly to issue a consultative document and it asked for response from a wide range of public bodies. The churches found themselves challenged to respond quickly and constructively. What should their attitude be?

The Hunt consultative document went out to individual churches but most were unsure of how to react in the very brief time allowed by the Inquiry for submissions. Accordingly Fr. Michael Mitchell, Director of the Catholic National Radio and TV Centre and Jim McDonnell of the CSCC convened a meeting of representatives of as many churches as possible to discuss what should be done.

An Ecumenical Response

The meeting decided that the churches should prepare a joint submission to Hunt under the auspices of the British Council of Churches (BCC). Individual churches would also make their submissions but these would be coordinated with the main themes of the BCC argument. The BCC response was drafted by Jim McDonnell and the Rev. Stephen Orchard, Division of Community Affairs, BCC, and was circulated as widely as possible in draft form for comments before being submitted. The BCC submission to Hunt is thus significant as the expression of an attempt to bring an inter-denominational point of view to bear on current media developments.

The Argument of the BCC Submission

The main themes of the church's argument are:

- i) the benefits of an expansion in cable systems should be available to all sections of the population, and rural and economically declining areas should not be neglected.
- ii) the present high quality and standards of public service broadcasting should not be undermined by cable; cable TV should complement not just compete with broadcasting.
- iii) there is a need to establish a right of public access to the electronic highway set up by cable and access should not be controlled simply by ability to pay.
- iv) interactive systems raise problems about protecting personal privacy (cf. Review Article). There must be adequate safeguards enacted at the start of cable system building.
- v) there should be some method of statutory public regulation to ensure that there is a measure of public accountability required of cable system operators and programmers, and to protect and preserve the wider public interest.
- vi) the local nature of cable is important and the needs of the local community should be taken into account in the planning of new systems. As a local resource the cable system should be subject to some degree of local supervision.

Where Do the Churches Go Now?

The BCC submission is only the first step in the churches' approach to cable. It indicates that the church is not anxious simply to ensure that it has a religious channel to itself. In fact, as the Catholic submission to Hunt stated, it was not thought appropriate for "particular religious or political organizations

to be given their own channel". The churches do not want to be placed in a religious ghetto, but they would like to see that they and other community and special interest groups be given access to cable systems. The British churches believe that it is by fighting to enlarge the potential of cable for all citizens that they can best be true to their particular mission.

Soon the Hunt Committee will report, the government will respond, and the British churches will have a better idea of how cable expansion is to be promoted. They will have to begin to

formulate specific objectives and a strategy which will condition their approach to cable for the future. The BCC submission showed what could be done in a very short time, and helped clarify some basic objectives. If that limited but significant achievement is to be built on, the churches will have to set up some permanent body soon to begin to plan a realistic but imaginative use of the cable opportunity.

The US: Living With Cable TV

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Unlike Britain and Germany the US churches have had many years to come to terms with cable. The problem they face is not cable's novelty but its familiarity. The danger is that instead of thinking up ways of using cable that meet the church's real needs and pastoral goals, churches will simply take over the well-tried existing formats for access and community TV. A second danger is that in their anxiety not to imitate the "electronic church" the mainline churches may fail to give adequate attention to the *entertainment* possibilities of cable. Without endorsing the methods of the TV evangelists it is necessary to recognize that they do, in fact, provide popular entertainment. Can the mainline churches find equally entertaining but different ways of communicating the Gospel? That is still a challenge.

The TeLicare service is one notable example of a successful use and adaptation of cable to the needs of its religious congregation.

Diocesan Television Services on Long Island, NY

TeLicare — Television Caring for Long Islanders — is the television centre of the Diocese of Rockville Centre, Long Island, New York (1345 Admiral Lane, Uniondale, NY 11553).

It produces and broadcasts programmes to parishes, homes and schools throughout the surrounding counties. Six cable companies carry their signal to the homes, while school service is by direct microwave transmission over four channels. TeLicare seeks to be the caretaker of the future, entrusted with bringing life-affirming human and Christian values to the media by the core message of the gospel. Thus evangelization, catechesis, education and community are its primary thrusts.

The titles of the series, for example, include the successful Paulist Fathers' *Insight* series of powerful dramas. Each programme offers some insight into a deeper meaning of the human experience and can be readily used as discussion-starters. *In The Footsteps of Jesus* is a visual experience photographed in Israel designed to make Christ's ministry come to life by giving the historical, geographical and social background. *Exploring the Arts* examines a variety of approaches to God through direct perception and contemplation of several artistic forms.

Community involvement is fostered by group viewing of TeLicare tapes, followed by discussions led by a Parish Utilization Coordinator. College students from nearby universities gain experience by helping to produce such programmes.

The philosophy behind such discussions is that television must be made to work for the Christian values the participants hold dear. The television series, which TeLicare provides can act as standards of what television could be. Various types of television awareness training consider its influence upon commercial advertising, violence, sexuality, stereotyping, children and the news. In addition to the pioneer *Television Awareness Training* (Media Action Research Centre, 475 Riverside Drive, NY

10115), there are the *Parent Participation TV Workshop Project*, (parents and children use television to open the lines of communication) and *Growing with Television*, which relates the television experience to the study of biblical values. TeLicare offers the possibility for other useful applications of video to church life. Many of the adult education programmes may be used for in-service teacher training or for part of certification for basic and advanced religious education. One priest, unable to make two simultaneous speaking appointments, videotaped his talk for one of them. Another records and studies the liturgies and helps the altar boys develop a more competent style. One active user of the services is convinced that videotape will be the medium of the future — the way to bring the Good News to the people.

Local Churches Urged to Use Cable

The Christian Associates of Southwest Pennsylvania (1800 Investment Bldg, 239 4th Ave, Pittsburgh, PA 15222), the largest US ecumenical agency with Catholic participation, have acted as a catalyst for the local churches to wake up to the advantages of using cable to extend their ministry to their civic community. Thus through cable, community growth will take place; as people begin to understand one another, the quality of life can improve. The goal is not an electronic church but an electronic link between the local parish and the community.

Thanks in part to the urging of Christian Associates, some 50 to 100 local parishes in towns of about 5,000 will opt to invest in the TV production facilities to reach more people, especially the unreached and the unreachable — through illness or alienation — in preparation for those crises when knowing a church to call on can bring solace.

Other churches will follow the few pioneers who have begun. Pastoral continuity from TV contact with a pastor to integration in church life will be needed. Ways to exchange and build up tape resources must be found. With the help of lay volunteers, day/night service and religious education rich in visuals can enhance church life.

San Francisco Ecumenical Cable Service

The Catholic Television Network (Rev. M. Reis, CTN, 324 Middlefield Rd., Menlo Park, CA 94025) will form the "Bay Area Religious Channel" (BARC) with the Jewish, Episcopal, Mormon, Lutheran and Presbyterian networks. They will pool their programming, studios and satellite services. BARC will be offered gratis to cable systems and no funds will be asked in the programmes. So far two large cable companies are interested in the idea which arose out of Catholic/Jewish discussion last June. Ultimately the goal is a jointly produced religious news programme. BARC will make use of the microwave network of CTN to deliver the input to the cable headends. When CTN acquires its own satellite antenna for any domestic satellite, national religious programming can be included in BARC's offerings.

Diocesan Communicator's Handbook

Dealing with Cable Television: A Guide for Catholic Diocesan Directors of Communication. Michael Botein, Janel Radke and David M. Rice. Forthcoming.

The key question for religious groups is deciding how to use the new possibilities cable offers: it is a problem of riches. Whereas previously an area would have the main network channels plus a few odd ones, cable offers by and large anywhere from 30 to 100 channels. If previously television sent one message to all in the area, cable permits "narrowcasting" aimed at a particular segment of the audience with its peculiar interest. Some systems permit interaction both with the head-end point of origination and even with other subscribers in teleconferencing.

For the religious group using cable there are at least four possible considerations. First, cable could assist the religious organization to carry out its ordinary internal, managerial and institutional functions: mailing lists sent from point to point, teleconferencing, transmitting large quantities of data and video signals. The Catholic Communications Network of America will start distributing its news throughout the country to Catholic newspapers, and video materials to cable systems. Such transmissions could produce an income, without copying the on-air solicitation of funds by non-major religious groups.

Secondly, taking advantage of cable's narrowcasting potential, religious groups could send individualized programmes to discrete audiences with their own peculiar interests. A target audience could be those of one age group, such as teenagers, the elderly. The more focused the programme content, the greater the impact. Ecumenical groups could also share the costs and contact many more than each could individually.

Thirdly, religious groups are in a position to assist the growth of social justice in the television field. For example, churches might assist local minority groups to obtain cable franchises by

advocacy before the civic authorities and by enabling financing. Religious groups might also work for longer-range goals, such as by fostering increased access by citizens to the use of cable in their communities the fairness doctrine is put into practice as may not have been possible with broadcast television.

There are, however, negative aspects of cable which religious users should consider. Cable could adversely affect mainstream religious organizations themselves in three possible ways. First, the benefits of a religious-owned cable contribution may tie up ever-dwindling monies. Second, narrowcasting may fragment the audience by training people to look only at what is of immediate relevance to them. Part of the impact of traditional religious programming will be lost when the whole listenership is no longer addressed. Of course, the opposite could happen: the young take an interest in the old as the elderly in turn may gain new insights into the young when they hear of the concerns the young have. Third, just as in broadcast television there was a gradual concentration of power into the hands of a few powerful networks, so cable may also become the domain of a few giants. Should one of these be a religious group, the challenge would be to wield the power with grace. But as concentration develops, the chances for the late-comers will dwindle. Minorities would have an even smaller chance of being heard.

In the light of the opportunity and risks cable represents, the diocesan communication official has most immediately to be informed about the down-to-earth aspects of cable franchising, either to obtain one for the religious group or to monitor the initial grant or later renewal of commercial cable companies.

Resources for Cable TV

Cable TV and Emerging Technologies Information Service

A variety of publications including a cable TV and video resource list are available from Dave Pomeroy, Coordinator, Communication Commission, National Council of Churches, 475 Riverside Drive, Room 860, New York, NY 10115. The resource lists about six dozen books, articles, and other materials and gives detailed information about where to obtain them. The topics include comprehensive cable information franchising, access and origination, programming sources, production, video for non-broadcast use, satellites, religious programming for groups, resourcing, historical and a list of denominational communications offices. A free copy of the NCC position papers is also available: "A Study Document of Pay-Cable" and "Churches and Cable". *Media and Values* No.13 (Fall) 1980, has useful articles on cable and detailed references. (Available from: Center for Communications Ministry, 1962 Shenandoah, Los Angeles, CA 90034, USA).

The Cable Television Information Center

(2100 M St., NW, Washington, DC 20037) provides resource material on how cable works and the possible shape of a cabled society. Their 10-minute film, *Cable: The Immediate Future*, is available for rental or purchase.

A Short Course in Cable is available free for the first copy from the Office of Communication, United Church of Christ (185 Madison Ave, New York, NY 10027).

National Federation of Local Cable Programmers (PO Box 832, Dubuque, IA 52001) publishes *Community Television*

Review, a quarterly rich in ideas on local programming and access. Also conducts an annual convention.

Cablelines, a bimonthly on cable issues. (Communications Resource Center, 2000 K St., NW, Washington, DC 20006).

CATJ, Journal of the Community Antenna Television Association, (4209 NW 23rd St., Suite 106, Oklahoma City, OK 73107) regularly discusses cable issues.

Rev. Ron Lengwin, Director of Communications, Christian Associates of Southwest Pennsylvania (239 4th Ave. Pittsburgh, PA 15222) draws on four years working on the Pittsburgh franchise when giving assistance involving cable franchise in other areas.

Jaberg, Gene and Louis G. Wargo. *The Video Pencil: Cable Communications for Church and Community.* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1980). First attempt to think systematically about the theology of cable and to explore what ministries are particularly suitable for cable. The dialogic encounter possible in two-way interactive cable communication is much closer to the biblical style of Divine/human encounter than the one-way monolithic sending of messages present in broadcast television now. Television's multi-media style of communication is much closer to a biblical God who shows Himself in work, and in sign such as clouds, fire, wind and earthquake. Cable communicators who follow an incarnational Lord prefer dialogue and relation with the audience to monologue and persuasion.