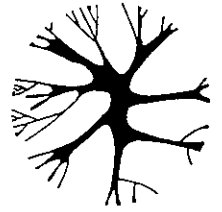


RESEARCH TRENDS IN RELIGIOUS COMMUNICATION



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The Family, Religion and the Media

Some, like Jerry Falwell and the televangelists, fear that the prediction of the family's demise will come true as the media age progresses. Others like Pope John Paul II are more hopeful. Perhaps the difference in their outlooks lies in their approaches to the media. The televangelists hold the media responsible for the decline in the traditional structure of the family and in its values. Because news programmes do not indicate what moral attitudes families should take towards family-related news items, such as abortion, test-tube babies, etc., some televangelists believe that families gradually absorb this apparently accepting attitude. While not excusing the media, Pope John Paul II in *Familiaris Consortio*, his Pastoral Instruction on the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World, looks to the family to provide more of its own moral criteria.

But either way, the family ultimately has to come to grips with the role of the media in its religious life. This Religious Supplement will report on two meetings of professionals seeking ways to bridge the gap between the Church and the family. It will also go into some activities families can employ to make TV a constructive force. Since healthy communication is indispensable for a family to handle TV in its life successfully, this issue will also take a look at the traits of healthy families as these relate to TV usage. Although the challenge the media have given the family is a strong one, the family is discovering resources it did not realize it had.

Have the Media Transformed the Family?

Mass Media and the Family: Proceedings of the International Congress. Milan, 25-29 June 1981. CISF, via Giotto 36, 20145 Milan.

The International Centre for Family Studies sponsored this Congress on the Mass Media and the Family as part of its continuing series on the family and current issues. The 1979 Congress was on the Child and the Media, and the 1980 one on Family Policy in Europe. For the 1981 Congress several hundred participants from 33 countries gathered on the 50th anniversary of the sponsoring institution, *Famiglia Cristiana*, a very popular Catholic family weekly.

Family and Media Professionals Cooperate

The two goals of the 1981 Congress were: 1. To give media and family professionals the chance to analyze how the media communicate with families and how families in turn receive the media; and 2. To discover ways to help families influence the media to provide programming and newspaper articles which enhance family life and values. Bishop Agnellus Andrew, OFM, of Great Britain and the then Vice-President of the Pontifical Commission for the Means of Social Communication, provided a background for the discussion by drawing on *Communio et Progressio*, the Pastoral Instruction on the Means of Social Communication.

Eric McLuhan, son of the late Marshall McLuhan, spoke on the particular challenges and dangers for the family in the electronic age.

He pinpointed three key theological questions that the world of the mass media pose for today's family. These questions concern the family and the parish, family identity, and the possibility of marital commitment.

1. THE FAMILY AND THE PARISH. Families learn how to treat one another from religious instruction in commandments such as 'love one another'. But, if they do not go to church, they may forget to live out these in practice and so interact poorly with one another during TV viewing. Hateful battles over which programme to watch are a clear sign of poor interaction patterns. McLuhan believes the new basis for community comes more from sharing the same information source, such as TV, and less from actual closeness to the nearest parish church. Thus, as families feel less need for the parish community, religious models of interaction may cease to be imitated. So the more families watch TV, the greater may be their sense of pseudo-community, and the less they may feel the need to drive to church for face-to-face community. Yet the need for a religious community remains unmet.

To help parishes meet such an issue, the Institute for Communication Research and Media Work (IKM) at Berchmanskolleg in Munich (Kaulbachstrasse 31) is exploring how to create communities by the use of interactive cable in an immense new

apartment complex. Rev. Horst Knott, S.J., Director, and others are seeking ways to overcome the alienation, loneliness and despair plaguing many residents. There could be a kind of cable parish in the making as participants exchange family news, pray for each other's needs, and discuss a scripture text. The possibilities are limited only by the designers' creativity and the participants' openness.

2. **FAMILY IDENTITY.** In order to have a position to work from when they mediate the impact of TV, families need to be able to formulate their own family ethos and spirit. But McLuhan questions whether families today can even muster enough independence of mind and heart to come up with their own self-definition in the face of the barrage of media images of family life, sexuality, and material gain. In an interesting study on this point, Rev. Jan Chrapek of Poland has shown that Polish Catholic families still have a religious belief which provides an effective antidote against government-sponsored programmes, which often offend against their morals and standards. And Canon Peter Bourne, Director of the National Catholic Radio and TV Centre at Hatch End outside of London, is contemplating a study of how often Catholic viewers' values come into play while viewing programmes like 'Dallas'.

Religion and Families: Nine Ways to Help

An Institute: Electronic Media, Popular Culture & Family Values. March 1984. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America.

The US Catholic Conference (of Bishops) Department of Communication, in conjunction with the Department of Education's Family Life Office, sponsored this three-day Institute to investigate the effect of television upon popular culture and family life. It aimed at arriving at a series of practical recommendations on the Church's role in promoting positive family use of the media.

Participants generally recognized that the parents are chiefly responsible for bringing their children up as their first and best teachers. Yet the values and impact of the media greatly affect the basic family relationships which sustain such parental education. In fact, the new technologies have been designed with the home as their main target. Those who work with families as part of their ministry were especially interested in underlining the importance of encouraging their colleagues to cooperate with parents in all media-related activities undertaken to benefit families.

Recommendations for the Bishops

With these principles in mind, the Institute participants arrived at the conclusions summarized under nine headings. 1. **MEDIA EDUCATION.** Education to use and understand the media well must become part of every curriculum at all school levels. Students need to understand the new technologies, to assess the values in the media, and to appreciate media impact on society. But the home itself is an often overlooked but privileged place for media education, since children generally imitate their parents' viewing patterns. Religious education centres are also to become media education centres.

New Media Education Curriculum

The US Catholic Conference has already designed and implemented THE MEDIA MIRROR curriculum on critical television viewing skills in several cooperating dioceses. It consists of booklets for each school level — elementary, early secondary and later secondary. The goals are to: 1. Help students understand the role and influence of TV on their values; 2. Encourage the positive use of TV and other media so students can become better citizens and parishoners; 3. Foster a sensitivity to Christian values latent in popular culture; 4. Train students to become discriminating viewers who actively choose programmes; 5. Gradually enable viewers to insist on better programming.

3. **THE POSSIBILITY OF MARITAL COMMITMENT.** McLuhan believes that the very nature of TV itself has bred a new kind of person who cannot sustain long-term commitments. The instant speed of TV has affected, he believes, how families perceive time altogether, and the disembodied character of TV images has trained viewers to think of themselves and others without enough attention to the body. TV's instantaneousness thus trains viewers to expect instant gratification and to make commitments lasting only a short time. McLuhan therefore fears for the future of the family, which depends on long-term commitment to spouse and child. And, since viewers become used to switching on and off the disembodied screen images, parents can even think of the unwanted foetus as literally a 'no-body' and therefore inconsequential, to be switched off like any unwanted programme.

The conclusion to be drawn from McLuhan's talk is that the ability of the family to filter TV's influence may be considerably undermined by exposure to TV itself. Once viewing has become habitual and even addictive, and families sit for hours without speaking to one another except during the ads, the likelihood of families providing effective mediation of TV decreases markedly.

Because of parents' key role in the media education of their children, THE MEDIA MIRROR involves parents by suggesting ways they can use TV wisely. Parents can: 1. Train their children to watch only selected programmes rather than whatever happens to come on; 2. Limit the total amount of TV the whole family and its members watch daily; 3. Select programming to stimulate, challenge, enrich and educate their children; 4. Watch TV with the whole family and discuss key issues as the occasion arises; 5. Help children distinguish reality from fantasy, e.g., by explaining the use of stunt men and camera tricks; 6. Point out the exaggeration and deception in TV ads; 7. Widen children's experience of the media by reading to them and making up original stories; 8. Encourage children to plan alternative activities, so TV is not needed as a last resort for entertainment. (Copies of THE MEDIA MIRROR from USCC, 1312 Mass. Ave, NW, Washington, DC 20005).

2. **COLLABORATION OF MINISTRIES.** The Institute participants also urged ministerial programmes serving families to cooperate with church communication departments to meet families' spiritual needs, especially through liturgy and religious education. On the national level there is already one promising initiative to combine communications with religious education in the family, the Family Media Project. Drs. Joseph and Mercedes Iannone and Mary Carter Waren (St Thomas Univ., 16400 NW 32nd St, Miami, FL 33054) are coordinating and seeking funding for this project. It will tell the Catholic story through a series of family media stories to be used in the home, family clusters, or parishes. The plan calls for six one-hour high quality dramatic stories based on the life of a family in the manner of "Dallas". The difference is that the series will feature values which enhance family life. Families can get videotapes and booklets which will help catalyze the family into a community so its faith becomes vibrant. The focus in the series will be on birth, adolescence, and death. The Project team hope to help families realize the basic goodness in creation, identify the true work of God in their lives, and act on this grace so their pilgrimage together can go more joyously with fewer strait-jacket attitudes.

3. **COMMUNICATION MODELS.** The communications ministry can make a significant contribution to all the other ministries serving the family. But there needs to be some

experimentation on how to do this. Too often the various agencies serving the family — religious education, charities, schools, the family life office — have functioned in isolation.

4. **MEDIA ADVOCACY.** Programming which encourages family values requires active support through reform of media law. Participants hope for easier access to TV and cable for families and the community at large to make programmes to suit their needs and interests. But these changes can come only with concerted effort, networking, and lobbying.

5. **COMMUNICATION RESEARCH.** There is a need for data on the effects of the media on the values and self-concept of families, parents, the elderly, the widowed, the divorced, minorities and other groups. Participants were in favour of the USCC stimulating such research.

6. **CATHOLIC COMMUNICATION CAMPAIGN.** The annual Campaign on Communication Sunday has funded a great many communication-related initiatives by the Church, such as **THE MEDIA MIRROR**. This Campaign should encourage the development of family-oriented programming in all the media for entertainment, information and religious instruction.

7. **MEDIA RELATIONS.** It often happens that the position of the Church on family and moral questions does not receive adequate

coverage. The participants encouraged establishing a liaison with the producers, writers and network administrators whose decisions shape popular programming.

8. **CHURCH LEADERSHIP.** The Bishops may wish to formulate a pastoral vision of the relationship between the Church and the media industry. It may even be possible to establish a communication ministry in the secular media. Research is needed on the religious imagination and how the media express it. Training in media literacy should be part of the Bishops' coming agenda, since they are often too busy to keep current with what their people are watching.

9. **THEOLOGICAL BASE.** Finally, participants feel the need for a consensus on Catholic family values and for ways to involve families and the media in encouraging these values. This last point relates well to the issue topic, family interaction with the media. It would be a considerable help to families in their task of mediating the impact of TV on their lives to be able to rely on a kind of credo of family values as these relate to TV. Although these nine recommendations have originated from a meeting in the US of participants from one religious tradition, there is much here that could be applied to those in other countries and from other religious traditions.

Creative Ways to Teach TV Literacy

Michael R. Kelley. *A Parent's Guide to Television: Making the Most of It*. New York: John Wiley, 1983.

Kelley goes a step beyond both **THE MEDIA MIRROR**. He takes a very strong stand on the absolute need for parental regulation of their children's TV use. He is convinced the only reasonable solution to the TV problem lies in a controlled use, and not in the total abolition of TV, as Marie Winn in *The Plug-in Drug* (New York: Viking, 1977) and Jerry Mander *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* (New York: Quill, 1978) argue. And Kelley offers a very down-to-earth and appealing set of activities to help parents actually teach their children to use television with as much skill as their age and development permit.

Some Positive Uses of TV

Godfrey Ellis et al¹ confirm the need to encourage parents to watch TV with their children. In a survey of 256 families in a major urban centre in a university community, 41 per cent of the parents had not watched cartoons or educational children's TV with their children in the previous week, while 16 per cent had done so at least three times. So, although parents do spend time with their children, co-viewing is not a common activity, at least according to this study.

Yet the 1972 US Surgeon General's Report suggested that parents can monitor their children's viewing most effectively by watching and discussing their children's programmes with them. Educational programmes are especially useful for such discussions. Ellis et al have identified several varieties of educational programming even on commercial TV: Education and 1. Information — news, and news magazines; 2. Instruction — marital communication and family functioning, gardening, etc; 4. Documentary — on family life topics, e.g. adoption; 4. Dramatization — reenactments of history; 5. Fine arts; 6. Consciousness-raising — social issues and cultural values, as in *Roots*. When a family has chosen to watch programmes which are most likely to start a good discussion about their own dreams, hopes, and fears, they may experience some of their most memorable times together.

Commercial Purpose Colours Everything

The first thing parents must realize, if they are living in a land with commercial TV, is how the commercial purpose influences every aspect of broadcasting; scripting, taping and scheduling. Since the

main purpose of such programmes is not to entertain, inform, or educate audiences but rather to deliver them to the highest bidding advertiser, producers must design their programmes to get and hold viewers' attention not so much during the actual programmes as during the ads. Kelley refers to a 1982 CBS documentary, 'Don't Touch that Dial', which reveals some of the mentality of producers as shown in their jargon. For example, 'top-spin' is having enough excitement in one scene to propel the audience into the next scene or into an ad. These formulas give commercial TV a certain predictability but restrict the range of scripts usable. Unless parents grasp the implications of using commercial TV, Kelley is convinced that they will never take the necessary steps to regulate seriously their children's viewing or to instruct them how to view responsibly.

But even granted the commercial nature of some TV, Kelley is convinced of the absolute need to limit all viewing to one hour a day for preschool children and two hours for those six to eighteen. Parents should set clear, consistent, and enforceable limits. And parents themselves have to become literate in their use of TV. They should know about it as an information and entertainment medium, as an art form, and about its production techniques and formats. Older viewers can teach how flawed TV was in the 1950s so the grandchildren can see through TV's technical perfection. This helps to demystify TV and domesticate it.

From Liability to Asset

But Kelley urges parents to go beyond merely setting an outside limit. Parents can teach their children to use TV as a resource, provided the children have first learned to compensate for the distortions and weaknesses involved in commercial TV. For example, TV frequently employs stereotypes of men and women, blacks and whites, young and old to appeal to the least common denominator. Parents should encourage their children to examine these stereotypes and contrast the TV image of, say, a woman on TV with the women in the child's life — mother, aunt, teacher, friend.

Special Help for Preschoolers

Preschoolers stand in the greatest need of their parents' help because their minds are poised to learn about the world. TV can overload their very receptive circuits. They need the most help in assimilating

¹ Ellis et al. 'Building Family Strengths through the Positive Use of Television,' in *Family Strengths 4: Positive Support Systems*. N. Stinnett et al eds., Univ of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1982, pp. 315-330.

TV. Yet they are often the ones most often left to view TV all alone, since parents often misuse it to baby-sit. Since TV can inundate them with pleasant and fearful images, Kelley believes they should never be allowed to see violent cartoons, dramas with high levels of tension, soap operas, or the evening news. If such scenes are unavoidable or unexpected, parents should comment on them and put them into perspective, saying that it is only a story. If an horrendous scene is coming up, they could distract the child. On the positive side, parents could just sit and watch with younger children, answering their questions, commenting on the action, and asking their likes and dislikes.

Kelley also gives several educational activities, such as having children imitate the ads once parents have explained the purpose and methods of ads. Then the child can invent slogans for products advertised, identify the words that make the product appealing, and reflect on how the music helps sell the product. Parents can also stimulate their children's creative imagination by helping them make an ad for their favourite food. Children's powers of critical thinking can grow if their parents explain how ads make the products seem bigger than life. Thus they learn to distinguish between reality and fantasy in ads.

Parental Encouragement Increases TV's Usefulness

Kelley's thesis is that learning happens whenever parents encourage their children to interact with TV content rather than passively absorbing its sights and sounds. As their children grow older, parents can lead them a step deeper in understanding both the important life themes which programmes touch on and the particular treatment the programme may give them. Since the parents' own viewing habits are the single most influential factor in their children's own patterns, it is helpful for them to ask themselves some important questions. Do they watch out of choice or habit? If they buy something advertised, is it out of reflex or need? Learning to use TV well is for every member of the family and something that has to be worked at constantly.

Healthy Families Mediate TV Best

Dolores Curran. *Traits of a Healthy Family*. Minn MN: Winston Press, 1983.

The ability of families to mediate television's impact depends in good part upon the quality of the communication among family members. The family which can communicate and listen to one another has begun to learn to have control over TV. The first and most obvious barrier to communication within the family is not having time to talk with one another. The author has found that many problem families have actually surrendered all their time together to watching TV. It seems an unwritten law not to interrupt anyone.

The problem is compounded in families with multiple sets bought to avoid clashes over programme choice. One family even had nine sets for seven people. It is a chicken-and-egg question to determine whether excessive viewing leads to or is caused by the collapse in family communication. But even while families are watching the same programme together on the same sofa they can be totally oblivious of one another. Many a 'television widow' with a husband sitting right next to her laments the fact that he has his mind a thousand miles away on the football game although his body is present. On the other hand, wives addicted to soap operas are just as effective in shutting themselves off from communication with the rest of the family.

Computers and Video Games: Bridge or Barrier?

Patricia Marks Greenfield, *Mind and Media: The effects of television, computers, and video games*. London: Fontana, 1984.

Patricia Greenfield, Professor of Psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles, goes beyond Kelley's treatment of TV as she describes how her young son, Matthew, introduced her to the

complex world of video games and computers. Her experiences have convinced her of the need for parents to take a fresh look at their children's use of video games and computers. Although parents may be inclined to scorn them as a colossal waste of time, she makes a strong case for even studying and discussing video games in the classroom. She also praises computers for the academic skills they can impart. Perhaps as parents grow to respect their children's various skills, so different from their own book-culture skills, the computer and video games which may have caused division could become a source of refocused family interaction.

Greenfield describes the revolution in her own thinking about the new technology when her son helped her see what she was missing. She had thought, for example, that Pac Man, one of the most popular video games, was just a matter of getting Pac Man to amass as many points as possible by 'eating' all of the dots it could before the monsters 'ate' Pac Man. She gradually came to see the hidden dimensions of this and other apparently simple video games. Her appreciation for her son's skill, much greater than hers, increased markedly when she saw that she was thinking rigidly and was less flexible in responding to the multiple dimensions the game involved.

Video Games Demand More than Board Games

Unlike traditional board games, like chess and cheques, video games like Pac Man require the player to figure out just what the rules are. To play well, players have to use inductive reasoning to get at the patterns governing the monsters' behaviour. Such games also require the power of processing parallel bits of information. She kept having to force herself to handle several bits of information simultaneously, something her son apparently did effortlessly. She had trained herself to think serially, a skill which reading books inculcates. Now that skill became a drawback. Another key difference between board and video games is that video games make use of interacting variables. In the video game, Tranquillity Base, for example, the player has to land a space ship successfully on a planet by coordinating six factors: altitude, vertical and horizontal speeds, direction, amount of fuel, and terrain. She had to learn to take in each factor and to respond to all six interacting variables at the same time.

Computers Impart Needed Skills

Although she admits computers will never be a panacea for all academic shortcomings, she does look forward to more college students having the necessary skill to think abstractly and to perform formal operations like revising texts with greater ease. She expects that as students master word processing and text revision by the use of computers, they will interiorize this skill of thinking abstractly in carrying out such formal operations. Moreover, classroom computers can encourage cooperative enterprise.

Finally, Professor Greenfield finds that even television can become an unsuspected educational asset. It can be used to enhance and motivate reading, and to foster visual literacy by teaching children to anticipate formats and patterns of behaviour. Each medium can contribute to a child's development; the ideal learning situation involves a multi-media approach to learning. As homes and schools become filled with computers and video games, parents and teachers may find themselves like Greenfield — learning these new skills from their children and students.

And even the youngest children may become their instructors. Mme Anne Bergeron of Quebec has designed 'Mimi', a computer programme for two-year-olds and older. They press a key to start a recording of a nursery rhyme and a little bee teaches them their letters and numbers. Bergeron has just won an award at the Festival International Logiciel d'Avignon in September 1984. If this early start is any indication of a trend, parents and teachers will seem to be retarding their children's progress if they have not kept up with the rapid changes. (*Hebdo Canada* 12/47, 17 Oct 1984, p 5).