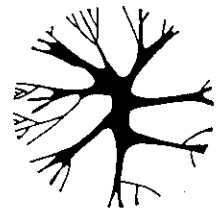


RESEARCH TRENDS IN RELIGIOUS COMMUNICATION



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Religion On The Electronic Newspaper

“Videotex is like religion — it requires faith and is non-profit”.

The words of the president of the US Digital Video Corporation could well be echoed by groups who have been working over the past four to five years to develop a church presence on videotex. It is accepted that the churches should be involved in publishing newspapers, books, and magazines. Church publishing in electronic form, however, still needs to be defended as a legitimate use of money and personnel.

One reason for scepticism regarding religious videotex is that, despite the recent popularity of broadcast teletext, videotex has yet to become a familiar public communication medium. Yet precisely because videotex is so new a medium there is an opportunity for the churches to have some influence on the way it is used to serve the public. As the research into electronic newspaper design by Dozier and Rice (reviewed earlier in this issue) indicates, existing ways of providing information on videotex answer the needs only of a limited, mostly commercial group of users.

As churchpeople struggle to master this new medium they have an opportunity to experiment in a creative way with a developing technology. In the past the churches were able to creatively appropriate the technologies of writing and printing; there is no reason to think that they cannot now appropriate electronic writing.

Religious Videotex Across The World

In July 1984 25 workers in religious videotex, from Australia, Canada, Belgium, France, Great Britain, the United States and West Germany, and from Catholic and Protestant churches, came together to share their understanding and experience. The venue: St John's College, Durham, England; the occasion: the Third International Seminar on Religious Videotex organized by Dr Mike Parsons of the Christian Viewdata Project, and Jim McDonnell of the CSCC. The proceedings of that seminar are being edited and will eventually appear as a separate report.

The seminar provided an opportunity for researchers from different countries to report on the state of religious videotex in their areas. The initial stages of the experiments in Germany, France, and Britain have already been reported in the Spring 1981 issue of *Communication Research Trends*. This issue of *Trends* gives a summary account of the 1984 reports from Germany, Canada, France and Britain, and extracts from a thought-provoking paper by John Orme Mills, OP. There is also a brief guide for teletext writers, which gives some idea of what writing for this new medium entails.

West Germany

The Catholic Church has been involved with the German viewdata system (*Bildschirmtext*) from its beginning. Now the German Evangelical Church has also become involved. Both churches

provide several thousand pages of information on church topics and services. *Bildschirmtext* subscribers can access these pages simply by calling up 'Katholische Kirche' or 'Evangelische Kirche' in the general index. The main Catholic editing centre is in Munich with local centres in Berlin and Dusseldorf. It is planned to set up six other centres. The Evangelical Church has an editing centre in Dusseldorf.

The *Bildschirmtext* system ended its trial phase in June 1984. Now that the trial phase is over, the churches will have to pay the German postal authority, which runs the system, for rental of its computers. The future of church work with videotex depends upon the availability of finance. It is not cheap to employ videotex editors nor to purchase and maintain editing equipment. Whether or not the churches want to continue to invest in videotex remains to be seen.

Canada

Télic is the name of the videotex project in Quebec managed by the Office des Communications Sociales for the Canadian Catholic Church. Videotex in Quebec has been promoted by the Videotron company, which produces an electronic newspaper on its cable system that reaches about 1 million homes. Since the summer of 1982 *Télic* has been providing a Christian daily thought and a weekly film suggestion to this news service.

Télé is also involved with Videotron's plans to upgrade its existing cable text system into a fully interactive videotex service. New converters will allow cable subscribers to select tv programmes, decode pay-tv and videotex, and engage in home shopping and banking. *Télé* will provide information to this new service in the following categories: current events and news; marriage, couple and family; worship, prayer and sacraments; churches, groups, ecumenism; bible, theology, doctrine.

Searchers Christian Information Inc of Toronto has also put information on videotex. Searchers has prepared daily Bible messages for use on the *Teleguide* system and on the private videotex service, *Grassroots*, which serves about 1,000 farm houses across the prairies.

France

The French Catholic Church has been putting information on the *Télé* viewdata experiment at Vélizy near Versailles. This trial came to an end in July 1984. The church provided some 295 pages of information. Unfortunately the results have not been encouraging. The writers of the pages found the format constricting, and it was not possible to do a proper user survey.

The French government, however, is committed to an expansion of videotex. In the next few years telephone subscribers will be provided with free terminals (Minitel) with which to access the electronic telephone directory that is replacing the printed version. By the end of 1985 there will be some 1½ million such terminals. These terminals can be used to access *Télé* services.

In the light of these developments it seems imperative that the church should continue its involvement at some level. Possibilities include the provision of religious information by diocesan centres to local videotex service centres and the establishment of a national centre which would supply information common to all dioceses (prayers, religious news and events, religious education material etc). Finally, research needs to be undertaken into the possibilities of developing an appropriate language for religious videotex.

Britain

Between 1981 and 1984 the Christian Viewdata Project at the University of Durham experimented with the possibility of using viewdata for evangelization. Two sequences of pages were produced: on marriage, and on the Resurrection. The idea was to make use of the interactive capabilities of the medium by allowing

readers to pick their way through the sequence according to their responses to questions at the bottom of each page.

The project finished in September 1984, and for the time being is not being extended. Instead research is being undertaken into the possibility of using microcomputers for religious education. The major obstacle to continuing Christian involvement with viewdata is lack of finance. It is expensive to create the pages and to store them in the national viewdata system *Prestel*.

Reflections On Information Technology

In addition to the reports on religious viewdata in various countries and the paper by John Orme Mills, there were papers by Bro. Ferdinand Poswick, OSB, of Promotion Bible et Informatique in Belgium and Hans Wolfgang Hessler of the German Evangelical Church.

Mr Hessler gave a general reflection on *New Information and Communication Technologies, Church and Society*, while Ferdinand Poswick gave a paper entitled *Computerized Language and Communication: New Writing, New Message?* Poswick argued that the churches have to come to terms with a totally new culture. This culture and the people within it are being shaped by telematics, the marriage of the computer and telecommunications. His main point was the need for the church to develop new strategies for evangelization and to use the new media in ways that would enhance human community and dignity.

Glossary

Videotex. Generic name for communication systems that use computers to generate text and graphics on television sets and monitors.

Viewdata. Interactive videotex. The system uses the telephone network to transmit the information to the television set. With a suitable adaptor viewdata users can send instructions to the viewdata computer.

Teletext. Broadcast videotex. Not interactive. The information is added to normal television signals and received by television sets equipped with a special decoder.

Cabletext. Videotex transmitted by broadband cable. Can be interactive or one-way.

Religious Videotex: A Theological Critique

By John Orme Mills, OP

The potential user of the churches' services on videotex will have either of two thoughts in mind — two thoughts superficially similar but in all sorts of ways different.

Either: "This thing I want to know about is something to do with the Church. Surely the Church must have the information listed on one of its pages on this machine?"

Or: "Here I am with this particular personal need, or maybe it is only a niggling question. Perhaps I can get at least the beginnings of help through this machine?"

Ephemeral Information

I do not need to point out the differences between these two potential users. What matters for us, now, is that much of what has been done so far (and, especially, much of what has been done successfully) on the church videotex services, particularly in Germany, is designed to meet the requirements of the first person: information on church-sponsored facilities, church activities and the life and organization of the church: church news; perhaps (in

the future) collated data on church affairs to aid ministers, scholars and journalists. The users of services of this sort are likely to identify fairly closely with the church themselves or have a strong if temporary motivation for knowing about some aspect of its life and work; some of them could make up the core of a regular clientele. The services they are using are those most obviously suitable for videotex. But the theologian is not likely to think he has anything special to contribute on what is being done in this area.

The Audience For Permanent Truths

It is what is done to meet the needs of the second category of potential users that is likely to interest the theologian. These are people turning to videotex for counselling and for guidance concerning Christian belief.

Quite a lot of these users are, if not outside the churches, at least likely to be people who feel distant from them and probably rather distrustful of organized religion. For the theologian the most urgent and interesting question is the controversial one: *Can videotex be used effectively for "outreach", for evangelization?* A report of the North East

Ecumenical Group, University of Durham, after speaking of the role of market places in the spread of Christianity in the ancient world, states that it believes the medium "has the potential of being such a market place for the late twentieth century in western society".

There are obvious differences. In traditional markets (which, in many Third World countries, are still very important places for news circulation) there is a dense level of random encounter — a dozen voices are trying to catch your attention all at the same time. Of all the modern media, the general newspaper is most like it. In contrast, the videotex user, sitting alone in front of a keypad, must, before calling up a "voice" (i.e. a page), make a decision.

Whether a user of this second category is, at least initially, looking simply for information and counselling of a very practical kind, or is looking for guidance concerning the truth about God, almost certainly (if the psychologists who have written on the techniques of persuasion are right) his or her exploration will begin as a response to a *felt need* of some sort. This, it seems, has tended to be insufficiently appreciated by presenters; they have seen the decision-making process as very rational.

Intellectual reflection can often be a very important part of the journey to faith but very rarely does the journey to faith actually *begin* from an intellectual enquiry. (The claim that routine non-evangelistic Christian radio broadcasting produces, for every hour of broadcasting, only one convert in every two million listeners may misrepresent the facts but it does make a point!) The word *metanoia* as it is used in the Bible always means more than an intellectual change of opinion. The change — the fundamental decision — concerns the whole human being in his or her fundamental relation to God, and presenters of material should constantly ask themselves: What sorts of situations — what range of questions and emotions — are likely to lead a user to call up these pages? The need to "meet the user" cannot be stressed too strongly, not merely for psychological but also for theological reasons. We are commanded to "go forth into the world", yet always remembering that leading others into solving life's problems or into faith is part of our own journey towards solving life's problems or further into faith.

Winning Attention — How?

However, having argued that in videotex it is essential that we meet the user on his or her own ground, the question arises: how? Whether or not Jesus rose from the dead is a subject of absorbing interest to Christians, but even if one presents cogent reasons for stating that Jesus did, the answer that comes from many people today is: "What does it matter to me whether He did or didn't?" Today even the prospect of death has not got the power it once had to prompt people into reflecting on fundamental questions about Reality. (We live, remember, in a society in which now the majority of people — and certainly the majority of the sort of people who use videotex in a country like Britain — expect nothing beyond this life, and in which death has become a cultural taboo.) So, few people outside the churches will be interested initially in calling up pages of arguments supporting Christian doctrines.

Christian faith is a life-way that meets deep, frequently unarticulated needs that surface in fairly routine life-situations (experiences of beauty and joy, anxiety and loneliness, illness and loss, conflict and partnership). At least the beginnings of evangelization using videotex must be linked to these, stimulating the lines of thought which could motivate further enquiry — enquiry more explicitly about Christian faith.

There are *theological* grounds for urging that what should be offered should be carefully integrated concrete information, counselling and teaching about Christianity: only in this way, at least through this medium, will the enquirer discern that Christianity could be part of his or her world.

Why not a "videotex religion"?

Further, there are strong arguments for contending that, at least through this medium, Christianity should be presented initially as a *serious option*. The space-limitations could even be turned to an advantage, for a very long tradition claims that a certain *reticence* in speech about holy things can be a powerful way of communicating about them (in modern Christian communicating we use far too many words, on the whole). Perhaps no more should be said than is needed to convince the enquirer that for Christianity there is a strong case.

The experience of workers in the mass media is that personal contact of some kind is normally needed to lead a person to take the step to Christian commitment. The aim of dialogue on videotex should be to encourage enquirers to make contact with the Christian community as soon as possible, and extremely careful thought should be given to the selection of the contacts listed. Whatever one's ecclesiology, there are powerful, theological reasons for resisting the development of a "videotex religion" (assuming this should become technically feasible). It would tend to be very private, very self-centred, very cerebral. All Christian communication should, in one way or another, build up Christian community.

The Potential of Religious Videotex

The role of videotex in the expanding and rapidly changing world of media still is in the course of being defined. However, it is fairly clear that most of those fears of it which might deter the churches from engagement in it and which have some relevance to the work of theologians have not got much foundation.

Nevertheless, we should not waste money and time trying to make it do what other media can do better.

Its strength is that it can quickly put in front of our eyes a small number of words, called from a massive and complex selection of "pages". Its value for conveying displays of condensed, very concrete information is established, and the churches have begun to explore its uses for conveying relatively ephemeral information. It is not the theologian's job to try to gauge the success of these experiments.

The question that is theologically interesting is: Can it do more than this well?

It is clear that, because of the shortage of space and the absence of sound and pictures and movement, on videotex quite a lot of the content of Christianity itself — in the area of feeling, of the moral life, and to some extent of reflection — can to varying degrees usually be conveyed better by other media. Furthermore, even when videotex is being used to convey religious ideas — i.e. prolegomena and exposition of "truths of faith" — the presenter of the material is subjected to quite severe technical limitations, which seem to discourage subtleties, hints of the possibility of varieties of interpretation, much interaction, etc. (The U.K. team writing of the sequence they prepared on the resurrection of Jesus Christ, mention "the ease with which the medium can shape the theology: it is a temptation to pre-package the argument into a form that easily fits the Prestel screen".) It is not surprising that the teams set up by the churches to experiment with the uses of videotex have been either reluctant to explore its possibilities for evangelization or have had rather discouraging initial experiences.

Nevertheless, the possibilities of videotex for conveying religious truth should not be underrated.

For videotex is a new way of using words.

For several decades in print fairly sophisticated academic and scientific "digests" and many popular digests have offered us a way of coping with the sheer quantity of words in modern life, and videotex has given to the form of the digest new possibilities, and will probably make it more important than ever.

Videotex could force us towards a new economy in our religious

thinking. The print media encouraged us to spread our ideas, and the results have certainly not been totally beneficial. Almost unlimited space has become a liability. Remember that in all the

great religious traditions economy of expression has often been a feature of religious thinking at its most powerful. The severe limitations of videotex as well as its assets could be a creative challenge.

Religious Videotex: Writing For The TV Screen

It is difficult for those who have no firsthand acquaintance with viewdata or teletext systems to envisage just what is involved in the creation of pages on the screen. Writing for viewdata or teletext demands a careful appreciation of the qualities and limitations of the medium. It demands above all a sensitivity to visual design and a willingness to reduce complex thoughts to their bare essentials. Teletext writers must be concise, precise, and informative in as few as 17 screen lines of 39 columns each.

In Britain *British Churches Teletext* gathers together people who want to prepare contributions for two daily pages on teletext. The BBC CEEFAX service has a page called *Christian Comment* and the independent television companies run the *Forethought* page on their ORACLE service. Each day these pages contain a comment on the news of the day, or on a topic of current interest, or perhaps a general reflection. *Christian Comment*, as the name implies, assumes that its readers are Christians or favourably disposed to Christianity. *Forethought*, on the other hand, does not assume that the reader is religiously inclined.

The following section is an edited version of notes prepared by the editor of the *Forethought* page, the Rev. Adrian Benjamin. These notes give a flavour of the problems facing the religious teletext writer. They help give some idea of what it means for ordinary Christians who are struggling to find an appropriate style and language for a new communication medium.

Questions Before Beginning To Write

1. Whom Do I Have In Mind?

Teletext is most often viewed in the evening just after people come in from work, or late in the evening before going to bed: the last flick of the switch when everything else is finished. The most popular pages are those covering news, weather, and sport; viewers are, according to research, supposed to be predominantly male, young, affluent, and technologically oriented — not a group usually found in church. The headings *Christian Comment* and *Forethought*, however, could have aroused expectations prompting a deliberate call.

2. What Do I Want The Reader To Experience?

Although teletext has been described as an 'ice-cool' medium primarily used to convey information, it still has an emotional impact. Do we want the reader to feel uneasy or reassured? Heartened or alarmed? We are not manipulating the emotions of others but sharing our own.

3. How Can I Motivate The Reader?

The information imparted on a page should not be 'dead'. It should lead to action. What words and phrases do people respond to? What subjects allow the readers both to fill in the missing words but also complete the thought with emotion or action on their part?

4. Do I Have Something To Give?

The best starting point in composing a page is something authentic in one's own life and faith; but if this is to be shared it must not be set down in theological code. Personal experience has to be universalized in such a way as to come across without losing its force.

5. What Is Topical In What I Want To Say?

Topicality is best seen not in terms of the newflash but of the

magazine. What are the current fashions and vogue words? Listen to everyday conversations and hear what is said after the conventional exchange on the weather. Teletext lends itself to the sharpening of thought: but it does so through its kinship with graffiti, head-lines, and slogans. We are here at the intellectual frontier with readers who would not call themselves intellectual. They use the medium because it gives precise and contemporary information that can be constantly updated.

Questions While Thinking And Writing

1. How Do I Seize The Reader's Attention?

A visual graphic or logo might be the first thing to think of; but if there is neither time nor space for art work then words must be used for this task. A bold (in all senses of the word) heading, or a sentence that makes the reader want to read on is needed. Examples are a question, a startling fact, a palpably untrue or tenuous statement, a paradox. The vocabulary of the head-line uses nouns as adjectives to pack meaning into a little space. Hebrew vocabulary is dynamic because verb-centred.

2. Has This My Personal Touch?

Writing a teletext page is an attempt to help, challenge, or inform someone unknown. The writers are offering themselves to others, and so have first to be true to themselves. We express ourselves in words and though these may be few on the screen, those used must be genuinely ours.

3. Do I Have To Say This?

Forethought and *Christian Comment* are almost the only conceptual pages on teletext. But in this medium concepts have to be communicated economically and quickly. Each line on the page should make some sort of sense on its own. Lines should follow these sense patterns. An extra line or a short one will then be another means of adding emphasis. If the page is part of a sequence ask if it makes sense on its own. How are you going to get the reader to read the next page in the sequence?

Assessing The Completed Page

1. Does It Look Right?

Is the thought expressed still centering around the word or words that encapsulate the main idea? If the main idea has been modified in the course of writing, what is the new idea? Will the graphics, the headline or the sentence that is a different colour from the rest help this page stick in the memory? Is the overall visual design pleasing to the eye?

2. Does It Read Right?

If the page has not been composed in a group, now is the time to show the result to a candid friend. Try reading the text out loud to them ... letting them read it out loud to you. Are they putting the emphases where you expected them to be? Are there accidental ambiguities? Are you happy with the deliberate ambiguities? Does the climax come at the right point (not necessarily at the end)? Are any statements too sweeping? Is your page immediately understandable?