

Transforming Media Literacy

by **Jolyon Mitchell**

We are all daily bombarded by output from television, radio, the print media and computers. How prepared are we for such an onslaught? Are we critical enough?

Media literacy is an important subject for the churches, says Jolyon Mitchell. It is vital that we help develop a theologically informed media literate community and we must begin with ourselves ...



Dr Jolyon Mitchell lectures in Communication and Theology at New College, Edinburgh University. Previously he was a producer with BBC World Service. His first book is *Visually Speaking: Radio and the Renaissance of Preaching*.

Media literacy is much more than teaching people how to read, listen to or watch programmes critically. At its best it can be empowering and liberating. It provides users of the different media, such as television, film, radio, print and computers, with the skills necessary for making better use of these means of communication. Media literacy is not something you either have or don't have, it is a skill that can be developed. As James Potter suggests in his fine book on *Media Literacy*: "We all occupy some position on the media literacy continuum. There is no point below which we can say that someone has no literacy, and there is no point at the high end, where we can say someone is fully literate – there is always room for improvement."

Traditionally, articles on media literacy or media education begin with a weighty pile of statistics that prove that we live and move and have our being in a media-saturated society. Here is a gentle reminder of a couple of those frequently quoted statistics: in the UK the average person watches around 24 hours of television a week, and by the time that they leave school some 50% of children will have spent more time in front of the television than in front of a teacher. It is clear that our rich communicative environment merits careful analysis.

Behind this article is the conviction that media literacy should not be confined to families, schools and colleges, but should also be part of the

programmes of churches, theological colleges and organisations such as the British and Foreign Bible Society. They, too, have a responsibility to be involved in the media literacy process. Given their theological foundations they have the potential to make a unique contribution. Marshall McLuhan once described media education as "civil defence against media fallout"; others have seen media literacy as a cure for "media blindness" or a compensation for "media shortsightedness".

Media as a Mirror?

Why then should churches be involved in media literacy? One reason is that certain media, such as popular television, can act like a mirror, reflecting aspects of humanity. For example, one scene in the cult science fiction television series *Babylon 5* has the commander of the space station, Jeffrey Sinclair, showcasing what is described as "earth's dominant belief system". The episode ends with the ambassadors from other planets being introduced not to a single belief system, but to over 45 brightly costumed representatives of some of the belief systems found on Earth. The ambassadors are taken down a long and diverse line of people which includes: an atheist, a Roman Catholic, a Zen Buddhist, a Muslim, an Orthodox Jew, a Hindu, a Greek Orthodox and so on.

Here then is a huge spectrum of religious traditions each embodied by one person who is placed side by side with representatives of other faiths. These are the final shots of the episode and leave a sense of the equality of religious traditions. There are no competing claims for truth or superiority, simply an introduction, a handshake and a smile. People whose beliefs and stories have traditionally been marginalised, such as Eskimos, Maoris and Aborigines, are given an equal showing with representatives of the major faiths. Whilst this is not syncretistic, it is hard not to see it as a strongly relativistic and post-modern reading of our world. This single example illustrates how television programmes can reflect particular elements of the spirit of our age, our *Zeitgeist*.

As I have suggested in *Visually Speaking*², in one evening of media consumption we can be faced with a kaleidoscopic choice of stories and images that raise questions about holding a Christian world-view. A Sudanese refugee stares hungrily out at the camera. A Polish Catholic plants a cross outside Auschwitz. An Islamic guide points to the place where thousands of women and children were massacred by eleventh century "Christian" crusaders. A dramatic recreation of Charles Darwin's voyages lead into a biologist's lucid defence of the "selfish gene" theory. A theoretical astrophysicist speaks from his wheelchair of ripples on the edge of the universe, of life on

▶ other planets and reading the mind of God. Adverts take us to the Garden of Eden with a certain deodorant and to hell without a particular lager. A Jewish Rabbi and a New Testament scholar debate the historical validity of the Resurrection accounts in the Gospels. A Scottish bishop advocates casual sex and smoking dope.

The freedom of the individual viewer or listener to choose which voice or story, if any, to listen to is epitomised by the scene from *Babylon 5* described above and a recent advert which concludes with a few simple words on the screen: "It's your choice." It is not surprising that we are so often told that single meta-narratives are no more.

Being more media literate will help us to be critically aware of how different media and individual programmes offer contrasting world-views and so contribute to our fragmented and Babel-like *Zeitgeist*. Media literacy at its best should also help us make more informed decisions.

Media literacy can also assist us see how we and the other viewers will use popular television in different ways depending on our own life experience. This means that the media can act like a curved mirror, which distorts what it reflects.

For instance, in a recent piece of research at Edinburgh University, Ailsa Tomkinson found that many teenagers' negative perceptions of religious leaders, as "perverts, puritans or prats", were reinforced by what they saw in soap operas. Only if they personally knew a pastor or priest or minister were they likely to be critical of what they saw, and offer an alternative reading of the negative characterisation, saying: "of course they are not like that in real life". Media literacy can add to life experience in empowering viewers to make more critical readings of stereotypical portrayals.

Media as a Window?

Developing our media literacy can also help us to use particular media as windows on to a world of suffering. In an episode of *EastEnders* (4 December 1997)

Bianca, following the loss of her baby, asks through tears: "Why do some people suffer more than others then, when they haven't done nothing to deserve it?" This kind of question is by no means a rare event in popular drama. It is rarer to hear such a thoughtful reply, as in this case when the vicar quietly replies: "I don't know. But what I do know, for some people, not all, but for some, suffering is the making of them. They find a courage they never knew they had and that's when the miracle sometimes happens." In this example, a deeply theological discussion is posed in a television drama usually watched by about ten times the number of people in a church on Sunday morning.

News may rarely command such large audiences as soap operas, but a "good war" or disaster invariably boosts ratings. A picture of a starving Rwandan orphan, a fleeing Kosovan refugee or another earthquake-damaged house are often carefully selected images. Media literacy attempts to provide viewers with the tools to see how the news is a highly selective and sometimes limited view.

If news is, as Jonathan Dimbleby once described it, "a window on the world", it is a narrow window with a limited horizon. In spite of claims to be objective, neutral and unbiased, news is a social construct which is formed by internal influences and external pressures in much the same way as many other kinds of programming. Even if a live news broadcast gives the appearance of spontaneity, it is normally the carefully choreographed product of a stop-watch culture.

I am not entirely persuaded by Noam Chomsky's thesis that television news is part of a giant conspiracy "manufacturing consent" from its viewers, but it is nevertheless a human window onto the world and one that merits careful analysis. Significant theological issues are often lurking behind the news headlines and images. Theologically informed media literacy enables the audience to go further, and attempt to explore questions about the apparent absence of a loving all-powerful God in the most tragic of news stories.

Media as a Telescope?

What else can media literacy help us to do apart from analyse how aspects of our humanity are reflected or mediated? A further reason for embracing media literacy is that it can also help us use the media like a telescope, which allows us to see whole new worlds.

Like Jesus' parables, popular films, for example, can offer us alternative views of reality. Consider the comments of George Lucas, creator of the *Star Wars* films, in a recent interview in *Time* magazine. He made it clear that he does not want to invent a religion or offer answers but he does want to make young people think about mystery, and to ask: "Is there a God? What does God look like? What does God sound like? What does God feel like? How do we relate to God?" He claims to have put the Force into the *Star Wars* movies in order to "try to awaken a certain kind of spirituality in young people", so that they might begin to ask questions about what he describes as "the mystery".

In much the same way that Galileo began to ask questions about the earth's place in the solar system as he looked through his telescope, so Lucas hopes that his *Star Wars* films will lead audiences to ask questions about the existence and nature of God.

In spite of what certain post-modern film critics argue, I believe it is still valuable to consider the stated intention of the director when analysing a film.

Just as a mirror or a telescope may offer us a view of ourselves or of a distant world, so films such as *Star Wars* may help us to look again at things we have forgotten. But do these films offer a distorted vision of reality? Extending our media literacy skills will perhaps allow us to develop a vision, like an X-ray, that will help us to go beneath the surface of the celluloid dreams created by the likes of Industrial Light and Magic (ILM).

The American journalist Bill Moyers believes that "the central ethic of our culture has been the Bible". Like the Bible, the *Star Wars* stories are about "fall, wandering, redemption, return. But the Bible no longer occupies that central place in our culture today. Young people are turning

to the movies for their inspiration, not to organised religion.”

Popular movies, soap operas and news will never meet our deepest spiritual needs, nor will they bring about reconciliation in Kosovo or Northern Ireland. Unlike Jesus’ parables they rarely challenge us to change our world-views or life-styles. These programmes or films, however, may provide starting points and questioning points for those searching for faith, a starting point in terms of how we deal with the other, the alien, and a questioning point in terms of enquiring about God’s vision for the universe. In the light of media literacy they may even be a site and source of religious insight.

On this basis, I would suggest that it is vital for Christians, churches and theological colleges to help develop a theologically informed media literacy.

Seeing Through the Media

Media literacy must go beyond an iconoclastic rejection or an uncritical embracing of the media, to a creative interpretative critique of the media. This is what I am advocating here. It is a creative process that would initially draw on what Michael Warren describes in his insightful book, *Seeing Through the Media*, as “critical demystification”.³ This approach encourages the viewer to ask: “Who wants me to see what I am seeing from the angle I am being allowed to see it, and why?”

It is important to emphasise that media literacy is more than simply the analysis of media texts, it is also about developing an awareness of why those messages are there. In other words, the political economy of individual media needs to be assessed. A theologically informed media literacy does not stop with the limited perspective of seeing media simply as a mirror, a window, and a telescope, it needs to ask even more foundational questions.

If, as Ecclesiastes 3.11 indicates, God has set eternity in our hearts, then a biblically rooted media literacy has the potential even to evoke a

yearning for God. Being disappointed, like many of the critics were, by a film like *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace*, may be a useful lesson in itself. A digitally formed dream world will gradually fade from our imaginations, as we yearn for another new visual feast. Our eyes like are hearts are often restless, but will only find their true vision and rest by seeing through the media. ■

Notes

¹ Potter, W James, *Media Literacy*, Sage 1998 p6.

² This paragraph is adapted from Mitchell, Jolyon, *Visually Speaking*, T & T Clark, 1999.

³ Warren, Michael, *Seeing Through the Media*, Trinity Press 1997 p 91
He goes on to ask: “As a skill, critical demystification asks and pursues answers to a series of questions about the production of culture via electronic culture: How does the technology work? Who has access to it and who is excluded? Whose voices and views are presented and whose excluded? Who controls access and the views presented? What alternative sources of communication are available to those excluded?” (p 92).