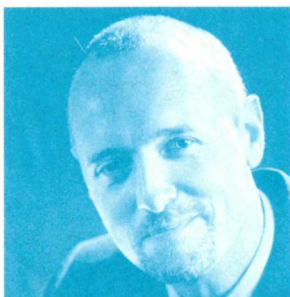


DEMOCRACY AND MEDIA SATURATION

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No attempt to discuss democracy would be complete without an article on the role of the media. Dave Landrum examines the impact of global media corporations on the climate of opinion and the numbing effect that too much analysis can have. He issues a clarion call for Christians at this election time to take arms against this "sea of amusements" by emerging with a subversive discourse of grace and truth.

PS "The man in Whitehall does not always know best" enjoined the Prime Minister as he addressed the Faithworks gathering of Church representatives. Wilberforce, 200 years ago, showed us what concerted action of state and community can do. The noble causes are still there and the call for action to make a difference is all the more urgent. What will you do before and after the general election?

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?¹

Global events and the policy options related to them were once the confines of the political elite, those with time, wealth and knowledge to consider, debate and act. In today's media-saturated society there is now little or no time for reflection and public debate. Decisions or positions on national or international events are demanded instantaneously. This is the age of sound bites, clichés, platitudes and spin. The dominance of the media, particularly television, has changed the nature of the political discourse and has profoundly influenced worldviews and conceptions of politics and democracy.

THE "MEDIASCAPE"

The medium has become the metaphor, so argues Neil Postman. His thesis charts a transition in human communication from oral culture that valued storytelling and emotion, to typographical culture that conversed in textual, rhetorical, rational manner, to our "info-tainment" culture of sensational, fragmented and impersonal visuality.² The conventional distinctions between knowledge, information and entertainment have blurred and the fundamental nature of human communication changed. Via audio, print, electronic, placards and products, we receive a daily deluge of messages, all competing for our attention and allegiance. This is the "mediascape" in which we now live and vote.

Although the transition from an oral to "info-tainment" culture is generally observed and accepted, the profundity of its consequences for democracy, politics

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► and the transmission of the gospel have not been sufficiently understood. Seeing the media in general, and television in particular, as incomparably the greatest single influence in our society, Malcolm Muggeridge observed its power to be largely exerted irresponsibly, arbitrarily, and without reference to any moral or intellectual, still less spiritual guidelines whatsoever. "Future historians," he wrote, "will surely see us as having created in the media a Frankenstein monster which no one knows how to control or direct, and marvel that we should have so meekly subjected ourselves to its destructive and often malign influence."³

The sheer volume, speed, form and intensity of the media creates a context of confusion in which "choice" erodes community and self. We see how the important is rendered trivial and the trivial is rendered important, and we experience "a kind of value vertigo, a disorientation regarding matters that matter". It appears that Orwell's nightmare vision of an authoritarian future seems to have been trumped by a Huxleyan nightmare of a *Brave New World* of wilful submission to perplexity and discontinuity – where "culture-death is a clear possibility".⁴

MEDIA SATURATION AND DRY POLITICS

In the forthcoming general election, global media corporations will no doubt seek to influence the climate of opinion. Structural changes within the economy of the mass media have largely been driven by a corporate approach in which ownership has become increasingly focused in the hands of fewer people. This institutional change means that global media corporations now largely transcend nation-state responsibility.

Such is the influence of these corporations that their support is considered to be crucial by politicians seeking power. The media can be both subtle and obvious in its intentions to manipulate public opinion. Subtle in ideological disguise and complexity, obvious in popular, and often offensive, appeal. While the paparazzi provide the montage of images for our context, it is the literati who frame the discourse and thereby set the parameters of what is possible or not possible to think.

Tone is also important. It is ironic that political journalism (particularly for TV) inculcates cynicism through its own self-destructive processes. In the absence of a desire for, or a recognition of, truth and/or the convention of deference, interviews with politicians seem to be conducted in a manner that is either so passive as to be perceived as obvious pandering and ego-massaging, or so aggressive that the deconstructive

bent simply engenders more anger and frustration in interviewee and viewer alike. Political alienation therefore increases as media coverage of politics increases.

Our senses are bombarded with choice through channels galore, we now have rolling news, 24/7 coverage, in-depth analysis, informed comment, on-the-spot reporting – all sensational and yet similar. Liberalism in its existing corrupted form creates intellectual elites with media profiles.⁵ Panels of experts, writers, artists and even comedians are wheeled out to disagree fundamentally about life, the universe and everything, bewildering us with informed opinions and leaving us feeling a bit ignorant and simplistic. Unless, you are very politically minded, the sheer depth, scope and intensity of political analysis, especially during election campaigns, can be numbing to the senses.

Consumer choice compounds the problem of quality with the problem of quantity. Whether, it is the attacks on the World Trade Center, the Iraq War or the Asian Tsunami, important world events are rendered hypnotic nuisances as saturation coverage compels us to physically tune in and subconsciously switch off and disengage at the same time. In the process of intense and prolonged media attention, we move from appreciation for the news to detachment from the news quite quickly. This desensitisation suggests that there seems to be a limit to what we can handle, but the news industry will not, or perhaps cannot accept this.

As viewers it seems that we maintain a self-deceptive, even dishonest relationship with the producers of the news programmes we watch. On the one hand, we expect accurate reporting, objective analysis and balanced presentation. On the other hand, we expect our worldview to be reinforced, our prejudices massaged and our enemies slighted. This illogicality may be an inevitable consequence of human nature and something we should simply accept, but it does not help the Christian injunction to value truth.

There will probably be a collaboration between BBC and ITV on the next election night. This will enable an exit poll to be taken in every constituency in order that we are given an idea of what may happen – six hours before we get the results proper. Are we so preoccupied and impatient with our political process that this is necessary or is this an example of the self-importance media experts driving saturation? Either way, defending such costly innovations becomes increasingly difficult in a media context that also involves a propensity for

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saturation coverage of political events to focus upon personalities ahead of policies. In mass society, this can have mass appeal, and as consumer demand drives soap-opera to supersede theatre, reality becomes increasingly unattainable and unimportant. Challenging even the discerning viewer, our information glut and preoccupation with the cult of the celebrity has created conditions in which we are no longer clear about what news is worth remembering or how any of it connects to anything else.⁶

As the primary secular point of reference and authority, politics promises far more than it can ever deliver. Politicians are simply not equipped to deal with many of the problems and issues besetting society today, yet the media enjoins us to continue our obsession with this illusion. Deprived of the capacity to interpret and the time necessary to consider and prepare a meaningful response to events that are played out in the media, it is increasingly difficult for honest, thoughtful, imaginative politicians to become influential in this milieu. Dan Watson observes that for our politicians to have mass appeal and “seem like ordinary people our leaders try not to say anything too difficult or challenging. But they must say something, partly to maintain the impression that they know something or believe something, but mainly because that’s how it works: it’s grist for the mill, so they try and say the thing that will have the most effect; a pointed, distilled sort of thing in what they reckon is language the mob will understand.”⁷

The combination of political imperatives and the consumptive demands of the mass media are not only impoverishing political language, they are also perpetuating a populist form of politics in which irreconcilables are being presented as compatible, and ambiguity is accepted.⁸ The capricious context for political communication helps explain the proliferation of think-tanks in the television age – the new producers, distillers and distributors of the message. Through carefully choreographed policy presentations, leaks and briefings, important concepts such as truth, justice, equality and peace are appropriated for ephemeral goals and largely emptied of their meaning. Through the new managerial discourse we now receive “social justice”, “inclusivity”, “community”, “governance”, “social capital”, and so on. Spin may bring short-term political gains, but increasing distrust of politicians, disdain for political processes and widespread voter apathy suggest that a democratic deficit builds up over time.

CHRISTIANS, THE MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY

A bleak picture has been painted of the context of democracy and mass media. But what can Christians do? For many, this changed context for communication has implications for mission and truth in terms of how we describe, defend and proclaim share the gospel.

Needless to say, for those with a calling in politics, the implications for public theology are profound. Our situation demands that we “renegotiate the presuppositions” of our audience and not cater to its truth decaying tendencies.⁹ The immediate challenge is to understand the media context that we inhabit, and from there to develop subversive discourses of grace and truth.

Postmodern culture demands the presentation of extreme positions in the media. More often than not, issues that are considered politically contentious or important become sensationalised and serious discourse is reduced to mere entertainment. The result is “Punch and Judy” politics, with any serious discourse unable to move beyond the confines of binary opposition. As James Jones, the Bishop of Liverpool, observes: “The media, especially television, which present and interpret the world to us, not only are dogged by [the] binary construction ... but also are surprisingly one dimensional in that they lack subtlety and can hold only one image at a time about any given subject.”¹⁰

We can see an example of this in the way discourse of Christians is characterised in the media by theological/ideological distinctions between a moralistic discourse on the right, focusing on duty, the family and personal responsibility and a liberal discourse on the left, focusing on rights, poverty and social responsibility. To quote Bishop Jones again: “Thus the church is *either* prophetic and pointing up the commandments of God, and out of touch with the modern world, *or* pastoral and demonstrating the compassion of God, and therefore compromising its traditional values.”¹¹

Such dualisms can be seen to reflect and sustain a theological bipolarity in Christian discourse between grace *or* truth, but the distinctions are as unsustainable as they are undesirable. The New Testament describes Jesus as one being “full of grace and truth”. It does not emphasise one at the expense of the other. If we are to move from reactive to proactive public theology, Christian political discourse therefore need to move beyond the confines of the “Punch and Judy” model and not accede to the demands of the media.

NOTES

1. TS Eliot quoted in R Hoggart, *Mass Media in a Mass Society – Myth and Reality* (London: Continuum, 2004).
2. N Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (London: Methuen, 1987).
3. M Muggeridge, W Graham and J Stott, *Christ and the Media* (London: Regent College Publishing, 2003).
4. Postman, *Amusing*, p. 161.
5. M Phillips, *The Corruption of Liberalism* (London: Centre for Policy Studies, 1997).
6. N Postman & S Powers, *How to Watch TV News* (London: Penguin, 1992).
7. D Watson, *Gobbledygook – How Clichés, Sludge and Management-speak are Strangling Our Public Language* (London: Atlantic Books, 2003), p. 75.
8. N Fairclough, *New Labour – New Language?* (London: Routledge, 2000).
9. DR Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity against the challenges of postmodernism* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000), p. 164.
10. J Jones and D Goddard, *The Moral Leader* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2002), p. 50.
11. *Ibid.*
12. J Gray, *Heresies – Against Progress and Other Illusions* (London: Granta Books, 2004).
13. Cardinal Paul Poupard, President of the Pontifical Council for Culture: “Christianity and the Challenges of Secularism, Unbelief and Religious Indifference” at the Saints Cyril and Methodius Theological Institute, Minsk, Belarus, 18 December 2004. <http://zenit.org/english/visualizza.php?html?sid=63746>
14. Manifesto of the Communist Party, 1848.
15. Postman, *Amusing*, p. 161.

► Alongside the contextual challenges related to media saturation in politics and democracy, Christians, as “salt and light”, are also called to value clarity and expose idolatry. In the complexity engendered by an overwhelmingly secularised media, popular conceptions of democracy are now suffering from a confusion between “means and ends”. As human ideologies are exhausted, democracy now stands sacrosanct as the inevitable political destination for a progressive age.¹² In the absence of viable alternatives and in the context of impoverished political thought and language, the ideal of democracy has evolved from being a fruitful process to become an idol. For Christians, this perceptual change has profound consequences because the centrality of the individual has been promoted but the real value of the human person has been forgotten. Such that democracy is now considered as a supreme value superior to the truth, rather than a privileged means for discerning, reflecting and protecting the truth.¹³

Ironically, it was Karl Marx who wrote that in the face of late-capitalism “everything that is solid melts into air and everything that is holy is profaned”.¹⁴ In order for democracy to withstand the present-centred mass-media news that uses slogans to report issues and presents image politics as a form of therapy, it is important that creative ways are explored in the de-mythologizing of the media. In countering the voyeurism and individualism engendered by consumerist media saturation of democracy, it is Christians who need to be the first to emerge with a truly post-postmodern discourse and respond to Neil Postman’s call, “Who is prepared to take arms against this sea of amusements?”¹⁵ ■