



# Radio Evangelization and the New Media

In 1990, the Vietnamese bishops who came to Rome to participate in the Synod being held that year offered an incredible testimony. They said that there were people scattered in isolated villages in the impenetrable forests of their country who know the Gospel without ever having met a priest. They call themselves “radio Christians,” the bishops explained, because it was through Radio Vatican and Radio Manila broadcasts that they heard the Good News, given the fact that the small Church of Vietnam has been under severe persecution by the government for decades.

This story, symbolic of the power of the radio, is also symbolic in a broader sense because it concerns an era that most of the planet has by now left behind, namely: analog technology. To put it simply, we can say that from the dawn of radio as a mass medium (1920’s-1930’s) up until the 1990’s, this instrument functioned substantially the way it was invented by William Marconi, that is to say, through the use of electromagnetic waves and antennae (analogic transmitters and receivers), even though the technology steadily improved as time went on, became more powerful (we have only to think of satellite transmissions) and developed an ever-more dynamic capacity to structure its programs and languages. Even today, short wave radio continues to be irreplaceable for people in parts of the world where the Internet and fiber optics are little more than an idea. In parts of Africa, for example, Vatican Radio is the only means by which the voice of the Pope can reach countless remote dioceses and villages, while things are totally different in zones that have experienced the “Internet boom” in the last fifteen years.

The progressive digitalization of radio signals—which decreed the end of domestic radio monopolies (car radios and transistors) as the only listening devices—urged radio broadcasters to profoundly rethink ways and strategies of communication. In this context, Catholic broadcasting stations have had to make a major effort to harmonize the thousands of digital avenues available with the type of content they transmit.

What does it mean to communicate a spiritual subject by microphone when a radio broadcast can in certain cases be “read” on a pc screen or on a smartphone? What point is there in simply *speaking* about a religious subject in a multimedia era in which programs can be watched live and can also be easily downloaded via podcasting—a service that has by now archived the old concept of radio programs aired at specific times, typical of a rigid, out-dated way of using this medium—but that has also redefined the features of the public? And speaking of the public, how can the radio attract audiences since, thanks to the World Wide Web, people are learning to exploit content via social networks (for example, Facebook has floated the possibility of an application for listening to personalized music radio channels), which are becoming more and more widespread? For Catholic radio stations in particular, all this raises not only technological but also ethical questions.

In recent years, Pope Benedict XVI has sketched out a specific magisterium for Catholic communicators, who populate what he calls “the digital continent.” His words should be taken into careful consideration. One of the first problems of the digital continent is that it is vastly overcrowded. This has given rise to the problem of recognition (Who am I listening to?) and therefore of reliability (Can I trust what this broadcaster is telling me?). Those who navigate the ever-changing world of the

Web are faced with the daily problem of evaluating the information they are seeking from among the hundreds of thousands of web sites, blogs and personal pages that the search engine obediently lists for every request. A Catholic medium like the radio could be tempted to create its own Internet page and with this believe it has satisfied requirement number one—to be present on the Web. In this regard, the Pope, in his message for World Communications Day 2010 (*The New Media at the Service of the Word*), says that “the spread of multimedia communications and its rich ‘menu of options’ might make us think it sufficient simply to be present on the Web, or to see it only as a space to be filled.” The Pope seems to be saying that a recognizable “logo” is not enough to automatically trigger esteem and attract listeners. Far from it. In his message for Word Communications Day 2011, he continues this line of thought, saying that in order for today’s new multimedia technologies to truly serve as superhighways for transmitting Gospel values, we must “challenge some of the ways of thinking typical of the web.” First of all, he affirms, “we must be aware that the truth which we long to share does not derive its worth from its ‘popularity’ or from the amount of attention it receives. We must make it known in its integrity, instead of seeking to make it acceptable or diluting it.” Consequently, “there exists a Christian way of being present in the digital world. [...] To proclaim the Gospel through the new media means not only to insert expressly religious content into different media platforms, but also to witness consistently, in one’s own digital profile and in the way one communicates choices, preferences and judgments that are fully consistent with the Gospel, even when it is not spoken of specifically.”

This, then, is the goal of a Catholic radio station that wants to play its proper role in the world of crossmedia, preparing itself professionally and competently so that it will have a future.

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