



The “New” Television

The United States and many Western European countries have by now switched from analog terrestrial television to digital terrestrial television—a transition still underway in Latin America, northern Asia and the Pacific and not yet begun in Africa, the Middle East and southern Asia. However, the changeover is inevitable

because this new technology offers a huge increase in channels (and consequently a wider advertising market), as well as better transmission and audio/visual reception.

These technological advances, however, are secondary with respect to the great change that is taking place with regard to the use of television on the part of both broadcasters and receivers.

The first innovation, as mentioned above, is the huge increase in TV channels: every national and local broadcaster now has at its disposition a collection of frequencies that contain many more channels than were available through the analog system. Zapping is becoming more and more common as viewers “shop around” for interesting programs. Formerly, people turned on the TV with a more or less specific idea of what they wanted to watch. Today, the choice of programs is rapidly passing into the power of the remote control: a person turns on the TV without knowing what he/she will find and moves from channel to channel until something interesting catches his/her attention.

In short, the viewer is becoming (or at least perceives him/herself to be) the protagonist in constructing a personalized viewing program.

Economy of attention: this new field of study is the result of the dissemination of the new instruments of communication, in which TV still plays a fundamental role. The time viewers have at their disposition to watch television is vastly inferior to the avalanche of information and messages being offered. The quantity of content easily available today through TV (and the Internet) is far greater than any human possibility to utilize it. As a result, strategies to “capture” viewers are becoming more and more refined: How can we catch the attention of TV audiences? How can we exploit this attention for our commercial purposes?

A first line of strategic action being pursued by the major TV broadcasters is to offer viewers repeated cycles of programs in categories of major interest such as sports, music, movies, variety shows, entertainment, religion, etc.

In many parts of the world, it is already possible for the viewer to select programs from an archive, without having to wait for a particular program to be aired on a specific day, at a specific time.

All in all, TV today is something entirely different than what it formerly was and thus it requires a new and more profound awareness of the medium. The mechanisms used to

capture audiences are becoming always more subtle, frequently playing on sentimentality and the sensational. But although content is abundant, it is often more superficial. Also to be noted is the fact that it is becoming almost impossible today for parents to control what TV programs their children watch.

But before passing judgment on the new TV phenomenon, we should remember that, as Christians, we cannot disregard the command of the Lord: “Go out to the whole world and proclaim the Good News.” Like the other technologies of communication, digital TV is also an extension of that “world” to which we are sent and in which we must be present as “Church-sacrament of salvation.”

Taking as a point of departure my modest experience in a diocese in northern Italy, I would like to offer here several points concerning Catholic broadcasting that merit special attention:

To speak on the level of the people: the language we use should be simple and direct, not the pompous language often associated with the ecclesiastical world.

To situate the content of the program in our local situation: in my experience, this is very important. The Church exists in a specific place, which has its own particular history, culture and values, but unfortunately these are rarely presented on television. Telling real stories about real people in concrete daily-life situations is perhaps the best “remedy” we can offer to the repetitive format of TV programs, which are often set in mythical times and places or else in no particular time and place.

To avoid “segregating” ourselves: the trend of TV to slot programs into special channels should not restrict us to proclaiming our message via channels that deal solely with religion, where what we have to say is perceived by viewers as almost “inevitable.” We should not be afraid to engage the general public in debate, to “dirty our hands,” to recount the life of faith as something relevant to our city and to the world.

The Liturgy: many people are asking that the Mass be broadcast on TV—something that is already being done by many Catholic channels. Our first concern should be to evaluate what is already available so as to ensure that viewers are being offered good-quality liturgical broadcasts.

Education: this is the most urgent and also the most difficult area on which Catholic broadcasting should focus. Today, the new technologies of communication are a true cultural environment: they not only powerfully influence the flow of ideas but also the way in which people form convictions. In this regard, the Bishops of Italy have not hesitated to use the term “pastoral conversion” to indicate the need to realize that we are in the midst of a revolutionary change affecting every level of society: from the family, to the parish, to the diocese, to movements, to religious communities. We must all become more aware of the fact that “communication” is no longer a sphere of pastoral work—it is the very environment in which we live.

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