

The Influence of Communications Technology and Mass Media in Modern Society: a Challenge for Public Theology

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The function of the mass media in modern societies

The mass media have gained great significance in culture and society (Keppler, 1999; Soeffner, 1998). Why this is so, and how this has come about, is what I want to outline in my paper. This will then lead to the question, what this means for the church if it wishes to remain a public church and what this means for the mission it has to 'communicate the gospel'. What are the consequences for church practice and for explicitly religious practice? But let us begin with a look at the rise to dominance of the mass media and its significance for wider culture and society.

There is general agreement in sociology and social theory that the function of the mass media consists in building, renewing, and increasing our knowledge concerning society, and in conveying that into other parts of society. Modern, functionally differentiated society cannot function without a system of mass media. For people need common, shared constructions of their social and subjective realities in functionally differentiated and pluralistic societies just as much as in others. These constructions enable them to interpret their experiences and come to grips with them in all their confusion and contingency and in their being caught up in different systems and networks of relationships. The mass media mediate, they bring us what we know about the world, about the events taking place in the world, which they make into the news which they report, and with which they entertain us. But above all – and this is, from our perspective of a theory of religion, the most significant aspect – the mass media also mediate, or convey, *meaning in a particular form*, they provide the symbolic horizons for the interpretation of our daily experiences, and they offer these forms of meaning for a verbalization of our desires, our hopes and our fears. Our everyday communications, including those concerning religion, what takes place in the worship service and the sermon, in religious instructi-

on and pastoral care, are in fact *connecting communications*: continuing that social communication, which is being provided by the mass media, by making the connection to our daily context.

It is therefore no surprise that Practical Theology has become aware that the planning and setting up of such formal elements as a symbolic space and a ritual performance are to a remarkable degree shaped by the models found on TV, particularly in regard to the occasional services of the church.¹ The occasional services are a kind of symbolic action of the church, through which the church represents the religious culture of society in its most explicit form. In the last few years, research has shown that, for example, the TV show 'Traumhochzeit' (*Dream Wedding*) has served to establish role patterns for how people plan their own wedding (de Mol, 1992; 1993). What happens in church is supposed to correspond to what we have seen on TV (Reichertz, 1999; Hauschildt, 1999). TV provides the stage direction for the church wedding, for the wedding photographs and video. Only in this way – one may assume – are the importance of the wedding in my life and the effect of the divine blessing guaranteed on a long-term basis. In church, the wedding must be performed in such a way that the pictures taken and the video of it provide an impressive presentation. It is the media which set the stage. And the media, too, guarantee the representation of the symbolic and theological content of the event.

The mass media and the construction of reality in society

Niklas Luhmann captures it well when he says: 'What we know about our society, about the world even, in which we live, we know through the mass media.' (Luhmann, 1996, 9) What we know about society, about politics, the economy, the law, about history and nature, but finally also about an ultimate, transcendent reality and about human faith in such a reality, about religion and the religions, about the church, has been transmitted through the mass media. Social communication and with that the way we are being conscious

¹ Pioneer work in regard to the media and their significance for religion and the church has been done by Horst Albrecht, *Die Religion der Massenmedien*, Stuttgart et.al. 1993; important impulse given by Hans-Joachim Benedict, *Fernsehen als Sinnsystem?*, in: Wolfram Fischer, Wolfgang Marhold (eds.), *Religionssoziologie als Wissenssoziologie*, Stuttgart 1978, 117 - 137; Hermann Pius Siller, *Bildschirmreligiosität – Thesen aus theologischer Sicht*, in: Eckhard Bieger, Wolfgang Fischer, Reinhold Jacobi, Peter Kottlorz (eds.), *zeitgeistlich. Religion und Fernsehen in den neunziger Jahren*, Köln 1994, 121 - 127; Günter Thomas, *Die Wiederverzauberung der Welt? Zu den religiösen Funktionen des Fernsehens*, in: Peter Buhmann, Petra Müller (eds.), *Die Zukunft des Fernsehens*, Stuttgart 1996, 113 - 139; Günter Thomas, *Medien, Ritual, Religion. Zur religiösen Funktion des Fernsehens*, Frankfurt a.M. 1998; and finally especially Arno Schilson, *Medienreligion. Zur Signatur der Gegenwart*, Tübingen 1997.

and aware of reality and make sense of it, rest on the mass media. Certainly, we still have personal contact and communication with others: there is socialising in families, neighbourhoods, among friends and in school. But all that is being communicated – through conversations, stories and reports, through contacts with parents, teachers, friends and acquaintances – always already follows from media communication. What knowledge parents, teachers, friends and acquaintances have about society, about nature and history, about God and the world, they have from books and newspapers, from the radio and TV and more recently also from the Internet. We do not usually take part in the mode of authentic experience, at least not in such a way that we have *been present, we ourselves*. We have everything transmitted and communicated to us through print and audio-visual media (Bausinger, 1984; Hoover and Lundby, 1997).

We have read, we have heard, we have seen images on the computer showing that the ozone hole above Antarctica has again grown larger last summer. We have not only read and heard about it, we have seen it on TV with our own eyes, just as people around the whole world became eye-witnesses of those two airplanes crashing into the World Trade Centre in New York. But in fact, we have become eyewitnesses only because there are methods of broadcasting live images which have been developed for TV by way of interposing media technology, producing a co-presence of events and news which almost completely transcends differences of time and space. Events that take place in the real world can become congruent with the reporting about them. And for how many, innumerable times has not every one of us after September 11, 2001, watched the Twin Towers collapse!

But has, what we read, see and hear through the media, *really* happened? Is it *really* true that the ozone hole above Antarctica is growing and will, in the end, endanger the whole atmosphere? Is it *really* true that on September 11, 2001, the Twin Towers in New York were hit by two passenger planes, causing them to collapse? We have heard and read about it, we have even seen the events of 9 - 11 'live' on TV. But have we been present? We have to believe the media, which in the case of live broadcasting is, no doubt, easier than with the printed word or with recorded TV reports, let alone computer simulations. But can we be sure what it is that the media present us? The media are always between us and the *images* we have of reality. We cannot get behind the media, we have no possibility to get to a real, a true reality to compare with and see the difference between true and false representations of it. To doubt the reports about the events of September 11, 2001, in New York would seem unreasonable. The media enhance our conviction that what they report is true, through various mutual agreement.

Certainly, the natural sciences are trying to discover the *truth* about the

world, about society, history, nature. But their findings – equally numerous and varied – again come to our knowledge only by way of the media, even if we ourselves are part of the scientific community. There are always *methods of technical transmission* interposed between our interactions and communications. We perceive that also the sciences offer us descriptions of reality, seen from a certain perspective. For publication of their discoveries and findings, they depend on the media (Rorty, 1992; 2000). We know that we can never be sure whether the media, our source of what we know about the world, can be trusted. But knowing this changes nothing of the fact that the media have an almost transcendental function for the constitution of our knowledge. They make up the structures of our attitude towards ourselves and the world. They form part of the conditions for our being able to know anything at all.

Media society

That is why we can speak of living in a ‘media society’, a concept first used by Jürgen Habermas, who originally applied it to the ‘structural change of public life’ (Habermas, 1990), a dynamic process underway since the 18th century.² Beginning with the invention of printing, and then with the rise of the bourgeois middle class, the media have decisively contributed to the instigation of change in the direction of a functionally differentiated, modern society. They have shaped their own, recursive, self-supporting system, a system of knowledge about society and its world. They have then, however, in Habermas’ view, played a considerable role in the ‘colonialization of the life world’, contributing to the destruction of the communicative structures in our interpersonal attitude towards ourselves and our world (Habermas, 1981).

The system of knowledge transmitted by way of the media has been made possible through technologies which have been interposed in the interaction between persons. Knowledge is being printed and broadcast. It is, due to compulsory education and the existence of a reading public, being read and received, listened to and watched. Yet this process of spreading knowledge about society and the world, about what we think is real, what we want to talk about with others, is possible only because of technology.

² As an anti-critique to Habermas’ critical position in regard to the media, cf. Rainer Vowe, *Medien und Öffentlichkeit*, in: Traugott Jähnichen, Wolfgang Maaser, Joachim von Soosten (eds.), *Flexible Welten. Sozialethische Herausforderungen auf dem Weg in die Informationsgesellschaft*, Münster 2002, 189 - 199.

The religious function of the mass media and the challenge of the church

What kinds of repercussions do the mass media have on people, their experiences and their way of acting? *How* are they shaping concepts of meaning, as far as this can be judged in terms of theoretical considerations? And therefore, *what kind* of influence do they have on religious consciousness? *What* challenges arise in view of this situation for the churches, if they want to keep themselves as public churches?

The media report about events. They inform us about what happens, what has changed, is different from how it was, and so on. Niklas Luhmann, following Gregory Bateson (1981, 488), defines *information* as 'any difference, which in connection with a later event will make a difference' (Luhmann, 1996, 39). This is a rather abstract description, but also a far-reaching one, at least in view of describing the mode of operation of the mass media. New is what has not been before, without which, however, there will be no reporting possible about anything happening later, anything that cannot be understood without this information. Information is what had not been known before in this particular form, and which is continued by a process of further news and reports, by the continuation of a story, and which must be continued by this in order to be understood, to make sense. Whatever is being kept in mind, over a shorter or a longer period of time, 'makes a difference'.

This constant consumption and therefore loss of information, and with it the desire for more and newer information, for news, is typical. The mass media spread information far and wide so that instantaneously everybody will count on its being known to everyone else. Just as our differentiated economy, depending on the flow of money, creates the never-ending need to replace money as soon as it has been spent, so the mass media create the need to replace information that has become redundant, that is non-information, by new information: 'fresh money and new information are the central motives of modern social dynamics.' (Luhmann, 1996, 44).

Exactly for that reason, it is the mass media – beside the money economy – which lies behind the much discussed peculiarities of our modern *time experience*. It is the mass media, which create what we call a *modernity consciousness*, the prevalence of what is new, making everything that is old look outdated and passé. In the network of global communication they stretch the co-temporality to make it cover the non-co-temporal. They make considerable use of a belief in progress still being strong in many spheres of life. The quite neurotic compulsion in the economy and in the sciences constantly to have to come up with something new has to do with the implications of the mass media in their culture-shaping capacity. The same is true for the economy, politics,

humanities and the arts. This dynamics of change is built into society itself; but this has not always been the case. It is expressed in the designation society gives itself by calling itself 'modern' or 'postmodern'. What is new, permanently grows old and has to be replaced by something newer. Modern times cannot stay modern, they must overtake themselves with 'postmodernism'. This obsessive need to assess developments in itself can be said to be caused by the mass media with their stress on information on a daily basis, which gives rise to a consciousness of permanent change and constant transformation. For the dynamization of society, therefore, the mass media are a decisive factor. With Luhmann one could say: They keep society awake (Luhmann, 1996, 47). They generate a permanently renewed readiness, to expect novelty, surprises, or maybe even disturbances. In this, the mass media 'fit in' with other functional systems like the economy, the sciences or politics with their ever own, accelerating dynamics, which are continuously confronting society with new problems.

The mass media enhance the dynamization of social developments, they encourage modernization processes, but together with that they also contribute to the disintegration of traditional relationships and milieus which once provided social stability. Through permanent confrontation with the ever new, the mass media are often *too demanding*, provoking a nostalgia for what appears to be well-known and well-trying, for traditional values and a clearly structured order. Through the assessment of social processes of change, promoted and supported by the media, religion and the church may be drawn into the side of nostalgic preservation of the old, as well as to the side of a hopeful optimism looking forward to the new.

We will most likely not expect the church to stand for provoking more crises, for additional acceleration, change, disturbance, or insecurity. Sometimes the self-understanding of the church seems to let it participate in the dynamics of change produced by the mass media, without much critical reflection. The gospel is then being broadcast as (good) *news*. Men and women are being called upon the *change* their lives. The church will then present itself as a *missionary* church, announcing an unheard-of truth, which has so far not been known. Such efforts of the church do, however, not evoke much enthusiasm – understandably enough. The message of the church is not new. As such, it lacks information value. It is highly redundant, and necessarily so. *Redundancy, repetition, remembrance* can become information, through *increased attention* being paid to the old, well-known, that which in its substance cannot really be improved. What this means, is regularly demonstrated by advertising, which depends on familiarity and repetition. Adverts don't worry us with presenting something new; instead they show us the attractions of the well-known, the

old, the familiar. How do they do that? By stirring our attention, by a shift in perspective, through the creation of metaphors, through eye-catching images; by way of telling stories. Creatively working with symbolic forms, advertising keeps awake the memory of what is already known.

There is potential in this method for religion, and perhaps also the church, to use this to their own advantage. It is a way, not of surprising with something new, but of settling deeper and grounding oneself in the familiar. Religion can recall the old *stories and images about life lived well*, can bring them back, call up memories and lead into their depth. Religion stands for *what is lasting in the dynamics of change, the presence of the infinite in the finite*. Proclamation as information, as announcement of a message is the wrong concept, as the whole idea of *proclamation* no longer works in the media society. Rather, the old traditions of religion are being called for, making accessible their well-trying meaning which has stood the test of time; pointing out the truth as it is present and accessible in words, forms and colours; painting images which make us stop and *tarry*, prompting high thoughts and deep feelings. This will not be accomplished through a reduction of redundancy, it calls for an *increase in resonance*. The perception of meaning offered by religion can take on a shape which the senses can grasp. Religion then works with well-known, familiar stories. Faced by our tremendously dynamic time experiences, it trusts that these stories will remind us of what is lasting. The old symbols can make possible an understanding of what it means to live in *this* time – with God going with us, at our side.

Consequences for religious communication in the church

It will then be the task of the church to tell salvation stories, not in the sense of provoking a heightened mood of crises, but helping to cope with crises and get the better of them, by way of finding reassurance about meaning in the absolute. The task will be to build a religious consciousness with the strength to put in order, being rooted in ultimate certainties of life. How can religious communication gain this ordering strength, whether in the media or inside the church?

What defines religion is that it has to do with ‘ultimate concerns’ (Paul Tillich), with *the symbolization of the final, the ultimate horizons of orientation for our existence*. This *symbolization* occurs with the *telling* of deeply meaningful stories and with the *shaping* of symbols, which give us something to gaze at and wonder, to think about at length, which awaken and keep alive the ‘sense for the infinite’, the dimension of the transcendent. Religion must not try to increase the already existing complexity and dynamic of our living con-

ditions; rather it must *transcend* them towards what is simple, steady, essential, eternal.

If, however, we want this religious communication to remain compatible with the way our modern consciousness works, we must take care not to set up the structure of a counter-culture, in a fundamentalist manner, when referring to the dimension of the absolute. We must take care that religious communication does not lose a connection to the awareness and perception of reality, as built by the media and communicated through them in society. This can be successfully done only if the shaping of our consciousness by the media is being constantly watched, and if, furthermore, we do not shrink back from acknowledging, that the media, too, are shaping religious consciousness – if mostly in non-religious language. The media, too, tell deeply meaningful stories and create symbols leading to the dimension of transcendence.

For the church, there can be only one consequence, and that is to want to do this even better, drawing on the wealth of powerful images and good stories from its tradition – and at the same time, applying a *hermeneutics*, an interpretation of present-time culture as well as of our tradition, able to *unfold meaning*. For this, we need theology.

In a media-driven society, theology must consciously reflect and consider how society functions. It will then be able to help create symbolic forms for a religious meaning perspective, which can be perceived as such, in society. Explicit religious communication, inside the church or outside, in the media, from the pulpit, on radio or TV, must always keep in mind the pressure of towards novelty on its audience. It is those experiences, specific for present-day culture, which we have in regard to ourselves, to others, to society, that call for a *religious interpretation*; through telling plausible and trustworthy stories and drawing images to make one think – as *being the word about God*.

The task of religious communication is to admit reality as presented by the media, but to *transform* it, to *analyse* it, to *reflect critically* upon it, to *interpret* it, and so to cause a shift in perspective. What is needed is *theological commentary on the times*, but in such a way that makes a marked difference to the political commentary due to the drawing out of a *religious perspective of meaning*. This perspective holds our interest and elicits thoughtfulness, not because of new stories and pictures, but because of its quite old, yet still moving stories and its thought provoking images. As a result, we may hear what Christianity has to say concerning our ambivalent experiences, our memories and expectations, which the media transmit and which are present in the deep structures of our present-day cultural consciousness. Christianity can respond to the *existential* questions triggered by the news – questions about meaning, how to make sense of catastrophes, political conflict and upheaval.

How theologians and the churches *react* to, how we *deal* with this image of reality, with the world view of the media, how we *interpret* it, and how we *understand ourselves* in it – this can become a topic of main interest for explicit religious communication within and beyond the media. It can only be a question of a theological communication continuing that of the media, a *commentary looking for a deeper meaning of a situation*, in the religious sense – with the mass media defining the situation as such. If well done, such a commentary can let us see the world ‘*quite differently*’.

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