

INVITED GROUPS

Topic: New Forms of Communication and Theology
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Paul Soukup reminded us that communication systems affect theology through cognitive practices, human relationships and interactions, educational systems, entertainment, trade, intercultural influences, power arrangements, political systems, and religious practices. Printing made texts plentiful; the World Wide Web makes texts easily searchable and linked. Where the telephone increased one-to-one contact, the Internet allows seamless many-to-many interactions.

The context. The world that people inhabit affects their religious outlook and practice.

- (1) *Access to Knowledge.* Following a centralized, hierarchical model, the mass media shape worldviews through entertainment and information. In contrast, new technologies like the Internet allow decentralized access.
- (2) *Time.* How do people spend their television or online time: For knowledge? For play? For interaction with others? For religious activities or questions?
- (3) *Concerns.* Media determine what we judge important.
- (4) *Knowledge vs. practice.* Theology is a body of doctrine aimed at worship or prayer and behavior. There is a disjunction between beliefs and practices.
- (5) *Connection with the world.* Happenings in distant places can emotionally engage us. But we cannot really do much, so we are distanced, unengaged.
- (6) *Effective expression.* Sound bites encapsulate issues for most people. Only the elite look to books. Effective communication becomes what entertains.
- (7) *Shifting place.* We have lost a sense of privacy, particularly as it applies to others: why shouldn't we know about the president's sex life? We are similarly suspicious of all authority, including religious authority.
- (8) *Audience.* The audience is not passive: it actively negotiates meaning, takes positions from its social and economic interests, and (often unconsciously) draws conclusions quite different from those who create the messages.
- (9) *Control.* Digital technologies can decentralize knowledge and governance, making it impossible to control what others know and how they live. The Church had its *nihil obstat* and *imprimatur*s, but most people today find them oppressive, quaint, or simply irrelevant. Anyone can put up a theological web page, appropriating the name "Catholic" without any official sanction.

Resources. Online repositories of all kinds are now instantly available; soon they will appear preindexed and searchable—but without any internal guideposts. Criticism and discussion will occur less in journals and more in site evaluations.

Methods. E-mail, chat rooms, videoconferencing, discussion boards, List Serves, web pages, electronic publication so far merely enhance current practice, replacing regular mail and typewriters. They can develop into something quite different. It took decades for the motion picture, radio, and television to take current shape.

Cognitive processes. Sequential patterns of analysis have given way to image, word, sound, and movement. Montage matters more than logic. Thought is more complex, encompassing more avenues of expression. David Robinson expanded on this. We have shifted from left brain to right brain: imagination, association, creativity, art, music. Adult learners are more holistic and organic, integrating linear with nonlinear thinking, learning data and theories in order to apply them. We have moved from proving via win/lose debates to mutual enrichment via win/win dialogues, from legal briefs to hyperlinks. Ray Noll said future texts will contain CD-ROMs, building in music, video, and animated graphics.

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