

# EDUCOMMUNICATION A TASK THAT STILL AWAITS US

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Media ownership - are we on the wrong track?

Five hours daily viewing TV often results quickly accepting obvious anti-values

"Education for TV" - workshops

RESUMEN: En muchos países de la iglesia quiere contar con medios propios : emisoras de radio, imprentas, centros de video, y también canales de televisión - un posible camino de fortalecer la presencia cristiana en el mundo de la comunicación. Jerry O'Sullivan-Ryan, ex-director del departamento de Comunicación Social de la Conferencia Episcopal de Venezuela y consultor de DECOS-CELAM, pone en duda esta prioridad. En virtud de sus experiencias con cursos sobre 'lectura crítica' da un impulso de descubrir la educación para la comunicación como tarea de evangelización.

For more than fifteen years I have worked in the field of communications with the Bishops' Conference of Venezuela. As Director of the communications department and as an advisor to the same department within the Latin American Bishops' Conference, I have travelled throughout the continent, attending many meetings, seminars and courses. Almost invariably Bishops and other church people speak of the need of having ownership of communication media. The Church in this continent already has ownership of several hundred radio stations, and in recent years more and more countries are getting church TV stations. Already in Venezuela, four dioceses have Catholic TV stations.

The more I see of this tendency, the more I feel we are on the wrong track. Most church owned media stations today are maintained by advertising. The basic programme format is similar to any other commercial station. Some seventy percent of the airtime is filled by imported programmes, almost exclusively from the U.S. There is a daily diet of childrens' programmes, soap operas, American series of cops, crime and law, most of which has a high content of violence and sex. It is probably true to say that there is less violence on the Catholic TV stations, which also generally means less audience and less advertising income.

## Are we able to use media?

My experience over the years working with dozens of groups of media users throughout Venezuela and with different socio-economic levels, clearly suggests to me that people lack a basic elementary education in media use. People dedicate on average four to five hours daily viewing TV, they see just about whatever is on the screen. They are hooked to the TV set, they can't get away from it. So many seem mesmerized by it, they get their news and views from it, and they trust it as if it were their best friend. They rarely discover any meaning beyond the joy, friendship, beauty, love and care that are all so often expressed in the commercials. The underlying meanings of exploitation of women, disrespect of the poor, materialism as the ultimate goal in life, racial differences that clearly indicate who runs the world, who is successful in life, who gets the good looking girl and all the prizes, go unnoticed for the vast majority. Yet these very anti-values are quietly and quickly being accepted, probably unconsciously. It tells us who we are, what power we have, who gets what, where and when. Our vision of the world and the myths by which we live, are all being filtered to us through television.

## A TV awareness programme

Back in 1988 we invited Valerio Fuenzalida to come to Caracas from Chile and give us an "education for TV" seminar. Some thirty people attended the three day event. These became our first core of promoters of our TV awareness programme. Over the years the programme has grown and developed. The workshops generally last one or two days. Each one starts with a brief introduction, some group dynamics and then on to the different types of TV programmes: news, childrens' programmes, soap operas, etc. Each session includes a short conceptual discussion, objectives and a series of steps to achieve these. The groups often develop their own soap operas, news and commercials. It is fascinating to see how they immediately reproduce the stereotypes that are familiar from the TV. If they produce a commercial about - let's say - detergents or other cleaning materials, the group immediately selects as the receiver of the message, a middle-aged dark-skinned person who is obviously poor-looking. However, if the commercial is to promote the sale and use of credit-cards, then a

young, wealthy, white coloured person is usually selected. All the trappings of wealth are generally included.

After the presentation of the sketches, group discussion starts, the promoter or facilitator guides the group towards some of the questions about the way television functions as an institution in society. Very quickly the group gets into basic ethical issues such as: why so much violence in the media, how does censorship and regulation operate in the media industry and why so much of the programming comes from the U.S.A?

## Understanding of communication messages

These workshops are not limited only to TV, young people are into video clips, music and magazines in a big way. So we try and work through the contents of these formats. The fact that the whole workshop is an exercise in group communication leads to new understanding and meaning of the communication messages. In recent years I have started to incorporate my students from the communications department of the Catholic university in this same activity. We set up small groups of about four students per team and then organise the workshop in one of the local communities, schools or parishes. The experience has been extraordinarily beneficial to all concerned. The students have to prepare the workshop with all the required materials, their audience is generally formed by people who have had few of the educational opportunities of the students, and who are high users of the media. This year alone we have been able to complete over forty workshops with the cooperation of the students, in many poor communities in the marginal areas of Caracas. The results have been extraordinary.

Daily average viewing is between four and five hours per person, on Sundays the average comes close to ten hours per person. Men and women may watch as many as four full length feature films on Sundays. The people recognise that oftentimes their children don't want to watch films that are saturated with violence and human suffering and degradation. However, because of street violence and insecurity in the shantytowns, they cannot let their children go onto the streets. There is no money available, and probably no interest either, for taking the children to a park, to the seaside, or for an eat-out together. Another interesting fact is the number of poor families that have a Video recorder.

At the conclusion of the workshops, reactions are generally very positive. People feel that they have a grasp of the monster that is TV, that they have to control its use particularly for their children. They have a feeling for the medium, how it is used and how its messages are prepared and presented. They begin to see how poor people are treated in the local news as against the presentation offered to the rich and powerful.

## Media education An evangelisation task of the Church?

The more I live this experience, the more I see the results from the workshops, the more I am convinced that this is real evangelisation. We are helping people to liberate themselves from the alienation and dominance of the media. People become adults in their relation and use of the media. Now I understand much better why the Holy Father, John Paul II, repeated some five times in his exhortation to social communicators for World Communication Day, in the decade of the eighties, that the first obligation of the Church is to educate people in their use of the media. In my personal perspective, this is more important than having media or even producing for the media. ■

How does television function in our societies ?

Students can help others to get a better feeling for communications

Towards liberation from the dominance of the media

RESUME : Dans beaucoup de pays, l'Eglise souhaite avoir ses propres moyens de communication: journaux, imprimeries, centres de production audiovisuelle, stations de radio et de télévision, et cela pour être capable d'assurer une présence chrétienne dans le monde de la communication. Cette priorité est remise ici en question par Jerry O'Sullivan-Ryan, ex-directeur du département de communication sociale de la Conférence Episcopale du Venezuela et conseiller du DECOS-CELAM, le département de communication au niveau continental. Il nous partage ici son expérience en édu-communication à travers des courtes sessions de "lecture critique" de la télévision : l'éducation du public à une réception active des médias est une nouvelle terre d'évangélisation.