POLITICAL ECONOMY OF TELEVANGELISM: ECUMENICAL BROADCASTING VS TELEMINISTRIES

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Acknowledgements

Mass media practices are generally of a 'top-down' nature. Messages manufactured by media institutions favour dominant perspectives. They are transmitted uni-linearly and largely exclude the voices of ordinary people, the poor and the socially marginalised.

Even in transitionary moments as occurred in Zimbabwe, the pre-revolutionary flow of communication from above is rarely transformed by new 'democratic' elites. This paper contests assumptions which have led to the monopoly of media practices by dominant elites.

It is argued that there are no necessary technological or theological reasons why religious broadcasting should not be of a bottom-up kind which expresses and engages various kinds of discourses.

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Individuals should have freedom to explore different perspectives in terms of their own class, ethnic, historical, language, gender, and cultural experiences. In the light of this perspective, in the first section below, we offer a political economy of televangelism.

Televangelism we define as exhortatory messages broadcast by non-demoninational preachers who finance their network and cable programmes by appeals to their viewers (Biernatzki 1991:1). Teleministries refers to the institutional business operations and structures run by televangelists.

These two terms - televangelism and teleministries - are often referred to in the research literature as the 'electronic church'.

Political Economy of Media Technologies

The first electric communications technologies, like two-way radio, were interactive. The onset of the Fordist industrial era in the 1920s, however, specified the exclusion of dialogical mechanisms except under licensed criteria. Restrictions were demanded by the military in particular, while business emphasized the entertainment value of radio receivers rather than participatory potential (Hayman and Tomaselli 1989:7-8).

The development of interactive electronic information technologies since the mid-1980s re-introduced the possibility of communal relations suppressed by earlier technologies which codified Shannon and Weaver's (1949) senderreceiver model. Below, we examine both the philosophical and communication paradigms which prefigured this kind of one-way interpersonal contact.

Historically, discussion of how media affect audiences has been grounded in two opposing paradigms: one teleological (**homo mechanicus**) and the other teleonomic (**homo sapiens-volens**). The mechanical metaphor emphasizes humankind's 'natural' propensity for manipulation. The latter conception models humans in terms of rational democracy in the Information Age. We propose a new approach, that of **homo communicare**, which locates people within discursive contexts which overshadow individual agency.

The Homo Mechanicus Paradigm

Homo mechanicus behaviour responds to internal and external stimuli. This psychology recreates the bureau-

cratic mentality of the Industrial Revolution's emphasis on 'mechanics'. Motive machinery and the input-output systems controlling them was the first of the capitalist technological revolutions to fundamentally alter social relations and methods of production (Mandel 1972:121). Printing presses were cumbersome technologies which required skilled labour, factory accommodation, and were largely incapable of personal or alternative appropriation.

The idea of people as **mechanicus**, as vulnerable to media effects, extends back to the early Greeks. Effects are specific reactions to particular stimuli. Effects research claims to predict close correspondences between media messages and audience reaction. The main elements in this model are: (a) a message (Stimulus) (b) a receiver (Organism) (c) the response (Effect). S-O-E. One assumption of this Pavlovian model is an image of modern society consisting of aggregates of relatively "atomized" individuals. These individuals mechanistically act out media-induced behaviour unconstrained by encompassing social and religious norms and values. Little or no account is taken of the mediating role of social or group structures.

This direct-effects paradigm holds that audiences, like machines, will misbehave when confronted with error (or evil) messages. The problem of how to ensure the ascendency of good over evil is found as far back as Plato. His solution was to eliminate the conflict between rational and emotional behaviour. He understood the common man as ignorant and anomic, governed by emotion, not reason; even childlike. These attributes, Mendelsohn (1989:815-7) argues, were thought to make ordinary citizens vulnerable to manipulation by unscrupu-

lous demagogues who command that the crowd obey without hesitation.

The psychological basis of **homo mechanicus** is behaviourism. Behaviourists consider the 'effects' of exposure to media as direct, automatic, uniform, and universal. The individual psyche is essentially fragile and easily corrupted and titillated, peculiarly vulnerable to outside forces. Televangelism recognises this and mobilises emotion in deliberate attempts to command mass audiences to particular kinds of narrowly determined thought and response.

Homo mechanicus entrenches autocratic management geared to the needs of Fordist mass production methods. This era of electric power introduced a new cycle of extended reproduction and the second technological revolution. Electricity facilitated the development of new more sophisticated machines and the production lines of late capitalism. Communication technologies empowered initiators of messages through development of expensive equipment which required highly skilled labour, centralised control, and specifically designed buildings. The advertising industry emerged to help pay for these facilities. The resulting economies of scale resulted in the production of generally affordable products by 'mass man' as receivers of messages.

Consumption on a mass scale thus emerged for the first time. Western religious institutions tended to replicate the communication management methods of this era. The 'mass society thesis' held that individuals needed to be protected from cultural degeneration and the social anarchy brought about by the loss of smaller integrated communal and cultural units caused by industrialisation. Dissident voices from below and the 'brutal' behaviour of the underclasses were explained as deviant articulations of individual ignorance governed by un-

controlled biological drives (see, eg., Jacobs 1961).

Televangelists assuming the homo-mechanicus paradigm constructed a 'mechanical' image of what they conceive to be robot-like audiences. Governance is seen by them to result from the will of God alone as interpreted by them and mediated by their communications technologies (see, eg., Fore 1987; Frankl 1987). The S-O-E notion is the most salient symbolic myth within televangelism. This church claims to have an S-O-E capability which has dominion over hearts and minds by remote control. Yet, teleministries evidence the contradiction of being a populist phenomenon. Where 'popular' describes 'bottom-up' relationships, 'populist' describes 'top-down' leadership. Populist teleministries used the opportunities provided by electronic media to identify and connect disparate individuals and groups disaffected with the conventional church into a meaningful mediated two-way relationship with charismatic televangelists (Hoover 1988).

The Homo Sapiens Paradigm

Structural-functionalism, a consequence of mid-20th Century industrial social assumptions, derives from the idea of 'rational man', homo sapiens. This pre-cybernetic image stems from the idea of knowledge-based consensual will and is concerned with exchanges between people, and between them and their leaders. It claims that 'effects' on receivers are limited and variable. Functionalism argues that individuals construct meaning and protect personality in terms of stabilizing norms and regulatory social systems. The homo sapiens paradigm, as (mis)interpreted by Mendelsohn, however, is over-optimistic in assigning individual agency. He cites Elihu Katz's unequivocal proclamation that "people

bend the media to their needs more readily than the media overpower them" as one such instance (Katz, Gurevitch and Haas, 1973:164). The point is that the structural-functional analysis of society embeds the individual within the group, itself part of the naturally stabilising propensity of the social system. The individual, argues this approach, does not act outside of systemic relationships that govern the functioning of groups in society. Dissenters and norm-breakers are studied as deviants or as manifesting social pathologies.

Life as homo sapiens decentres the will of God. Governance stems from 'public opinion', the knowledge-based will of rational common man (Mendelsohn 1989:816-7). It is this deflection of religion from the centre of the polity that the televangelists, and other religious evangelists like those of Islam, wish to recuperate and revitalise. Generally, their method is to draw on the primitive conception of the individual as homo mechanicus.

The Homo-Sapiens-Volens Paradigm

Combining theories of cognition, motivation, cybernetics and action produced a new synthesized approach, homo sapiens-volens. This paradigm asserts that audiences retain "minded" agency in their interactions with media and other social processes. This affirmative structural-functionalism introduced the element of individual motivation. The social actor is seen as strong-minded and self-willed. As a result, people process information not necessarily in accordance with the intent of the communicator. Rather, meanings are 'constructed' by audiences to fit in with their personal needs, values, expectations, aspirations, knowledge and experiences. Courses of action can be selected and consequences known.

Homo sapiens-volens, seriously questioned by certain anti-humanist strands of historical materialism (eg. Althusser 1971a, 1971b) during the 1970s and '80s, has regained a degree of credibility in the post-modern, post-industrial information society that began to emerge in the mid-1980s. However, individuals do not deterministically act out media models in social reality as the behaviourists would have it. Neither are they entirely free-willed cognitive agents operating outside ideology as the volens paradigm insists. While people do retain individual agency in constructing their own meanings from media messages, these either confirm or question their respective ideologies. Social practices and individual responses are spoken by ideology and shaped by media interpretations of class, cultural and historical experiences. Thus the individual's encounter with the media and non-media worlds - discursive networks - generally occurs through one of semiotic negotiation. This occurs in terms of the ideological grids into which individuals have been located by class relations.

If past industrial epochs generated particular assumptions about media and communication, then the same must be said of the current era of post-modernism, the post-industrial era in which machines are controlled by electronic apparatuses — which marks the third technological revolution. In this era, information and knowledge become the major commodities. Global corporations use information to control and manage their trans-national primary, secondary and tertiary industries.

The paradox of televangelism is that its use of trans-national business methods and communications technologies facilitated by the third technological revolution, is impeded by its dyadic assumptions of communication, which

call on an archaic S-O-E model of human behaviour. These reflect Marshall McLuhan's historical succession principle in which every medium tends to become the content of the medium that historically succeeds it. Thus tub thumping preaching developed for the pulpit becomes the content of radio, and then television.

Homo Sapiens Communicare

The post-modern age is dominated by information exchange, decentralised control and redistribution of communication technologies to ordinary people. Message-making which once required big capital, engineers and centralised facilities like a TV studio, can now be done by relatively unskilled users of cheap, sophisticated and portable video, personal computers, fax machines and so on. Multiplicities of voices unconstrained by time or space are now in direct and almost immediate electronically mediated contact with each other. While First World communicators again predominate in computer and telecommunications controlled interactions, networks established in Third World countries have begun to incorporate previously marginalised voices into the international information grids.

Sections of the Church have successfully harnessed the new media towards recovering the community of persons. A variety of channels ranging from 'group media' to 'community based print media' have been established. Vatican II Theology, for example, crucially anticipated the interactive potential of this third technological revolution. This Theology is aimed at rescuing people from alienating hierarchical and one-way or dyadically constrained modernist mass communications and exploitative economic structures.

Televangelists, in contrast, are disinterested in the ambience or sitz-um-leben of the audience as homo sapiens communicare. Theirs is an authoritarian emphasis on the mechanics and technicalities of the medium, aimed at eliciting specific responses from receivers/participants. The electronic church (televangelism) constructs viewers as an amorphous homo mechanicus 'mass' who are spoken 'down to', ministered to, and interacted with by telephone and computers and direct mail through spin-off ministries. But these recipients are simultaneously discouraged from questioning the perspective of the messages transmitted or the accountability and structure of the tele-ministries (Hoover 1988; Fore 1987; Frankl 1987; Ableman and Hoover 1990).

Raymond Williams (1961:189) has questioned this stereotypical view of the 'masses': "There are in fact no masses; there are only ways of seeing people as masses". The idea of 'mass' media derived from this view of people as a 'mass', easily segmented into consumer (or religious) markets which could be persuaded to particular responses by means of specifically constructed messages.

The emphases of televangelistic messages are on:

- experiential/emotional theologies;
- charismatic personality cults of broadcasters;
- business values in broadcasting control;
- faith in mass media ordained by God;
- conventional, high budget and slick media formats and programming; and
- spin-off ministries and fund raising during broadcasts (Schultz 1989:113; Frankl 1987). Personal

contact is obtained through telephones and computers (Fore 1987:85).

William Fore (1987:83-4) identified five generations of the electronic church, spanning the history of American television:

- 1950s TV coverage of revival meetings (eg. Billy Graham);

- by the mid-1950s the medium begins to shape the nature of the revival meeting which moves from the tent to the studio (eg. Oral Roberts);

- during the 1960s churches and services were designed especially for TV (eg. Rex Humbard);

- The 'host show' coffee table dialogue in front of a studio audience (eg. Pat Robertson);

- establishment of TV networks facilitated by deregulation (eg. Robertson, Jim and Tammy Bakker).

In America, televangelism attracted socially powerful conservative audiences who were dissatisfied with the role of existing religious TV programming. Others were looking for a sense of community and involvement they were not getting from their conventional churches. The teleministries were thus filling spiritual and pastoral needs ignored or under-provided by conventional institutions.

The end of the policy of networks giving free broadcast time to 'mainstream' religious denominations — Catholics, Lutherans, Baptists etc — led to radical changes in religious broadcasting (Biernatzki 1991:1). The organized churches have almost disappeared from the US TV channels, while televangelists, who finance their broadcasts by appeals to their viewers, established and/or pur-

chased satellite-cable combination and national networks following deregulation in the mid-1970s. The resulting financial power of the televangelists privileged their 'religious viewpoints' as primary during the 1980s.

The teleministries' identification with fundamentalism and Pentecostalism resulted in an alliance between conservative religions and reactionary political forces, as occurred in the US during the Reagan and Bush administrations (Jackson 1981). To the extent that evangelists constitute a wealthy bloc, it lies in their capacity to mobilize a sizable body of the electorate. As Jeffrey Hadden asserts, "They don't have to expend the great amounts of energy that other movements have had to do, over a long period of time, in order to gain media attention. All they have to do is to turn on their cameras and transmitters and they have access to very substantial and sympathetic audiences" (Hadden; 1980:6). The relationship between politics and religion can be crucial in the way media institutions are used to mobilise constituencies.

Below we critique the model of communication used by the electronic church which corresponds to the Homo mechanicus model. We then propose an alternative.

The Myth of 'Mass Communication'

The way communication flow is institutionalised in a society reveals its assumptions of democracy and conceptions of humanity and religion. The 'mass' media is the preferred communication of multinational capitalism, liberal and authoritarian states. The Eastern Bloc Leninist-vanguardist countries applied even narrower and more deterministic media models in futile at-

tempts to control their populations consciousnesses.

Citizens are spoken 'down to' by their own culture industries. The First (North) World also communicates 'down to' the Third (South) World. Much Christian communication, in its characteristic "homiletic" form (Bluck 1989: Chapter 5), assumes this homo mechanicus pattern. At both the intra- and inter-national levels, the Christian 'top', which replicates the architectural separation between the pulpit and congregation, 'commands' the secular 'bottom' - congregations and TV/radio audiences. Populist communication from above complements conservative political practices which discourage secular participation in decision/meaning-making.

Inadequate knowledge of local social conditions and cultural needs is a failing of mass media. Because managers and owners conceive of audiences as mass consumers, they incorrectly imagine that these recipients are getting what they want. The problem resides in the functionalist Communicator-Medium-Recipient (C-M-R) model adapted by communication scholars from 1940s telecommunications modelling studies conducted by Bell Laboratories (Shannon and Weaver, 1949). The model cannot describe resistance, contestation, rejection, negotiation, misunderstanding (or even understanding) of information imposed on recipients. C-M-R appeals to bureaucrats requiring efficient control of civil and military administrations. By this means, state, business and religious elites reserve for themselves the right to speak to whom about what, when and how. C-M-R has obvious similarities with S-O-E in that the prevailing industrial paradigm of the 1940s, '50s and '60s reinforced this mechanistic view of social organisation, production and communication.

Communication from above envisages passive empty-headed recipients expectantly waiting for leaders, 'experts', ideologues, advertisers, politicians and televangelists to expound on what is best and right. C-M-R/S-O-E are the televangelical equivalents of homo-mechanicus. Their emphasis is on rhetorical information, from the Latin, informo, which means to shape or to give form to.

Bottom-Up Dialogical Communication

Media policies which reflect grassroots sentiment raise questions of theological significance (see WACC, 1984:18; Traber, 1984): "the word communication comes from the Latin communis (common) and communicare (to establish a community, to share)". Theologically, communication begins and ends with that dimension of dialogue. The opposite of communication, argues Michael Traber (1989:61), is not "silence but sinfulness - the refusal to communicate and to be in communion".

Dialogical or popular communication facilitates a bottom-up empowering of the community. Ironically, during the 1970s and '80s, because of management and production needs for rapid world-wide interactive communication, multi-national capital produced electronic communications technologies able to facilitate global mass interaction (eg. satellites, electronic mail and computer networking, teleconferencing, interactive telecommunications such as video-text, hypermedia and so on). But it was Vatican II Theology which opened the way to an extraordinary development in popular communication theory and practice in Latin America and Africa (Lowe, 1983: 73-84; Media Development; Group Media Journal). Media workers, publications

71

and the agencies they worked for mobilised this Theology in relation to the new interactive and personal media to transform existing communication practices within the context of broader strategies for social and political change:

With the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church as a whole adopted a much more affirmative attitude to the electronic media. The caution of Vigilante Cura was replaced by the Council document Inter Mirifica. The new electronic technology was declared to be "among the wonders" of God's world. No matter which country they represented, the Council fathers could not doubt that broadcasting had changed the world ... A new value was placed on Christians working in public broadcasting (Elvy 1990:27).

This kind of communication is theologically accounted for in the homo sapiens-volens paradigm which takes into account multi-religious and multi-cultural perspectives. Only the public broadcasting model is able to ensure this.

Information Technology: Rediscovering the Community

The challenge for religious communicators is to develop public broadcasting models through which the technologies and opportunities of the Information Age can be used to construct participatory interaction which re-connects people with one another, urban and rural, rich and poor, First, Second and Third Worlds, in which community is understood in its theological sense. This requires that a communication policy, or at least some general guidelines, be developed. Traber (1984:68-70) offers the following:

• investment in the phenomenon of communication;

• replacing message-oriented ('top') communication with people-oriented ('bottom') interaction; emphasizing equality and egality between religious leaders and the laity;

• substituting the concept of the "covenant relationship" for hierarchically structured communication practices;

• the value of justice implies both popular and affirmative access to religious media by both integrated and marginalised communities at local, regional, national and international levels; and

• a thorough overhauling of conventional media language.

In Greek times the public square offered sites for communication and debate. In the post-modern age the square has been substituted by the 'sphere', facilitated by electronic communications technologies. The creation of local public spheres or telecommunities of interest is one way active/participatory cultures could develop.

Grassroots empowerment via telecommunities of interest could act as brakes on secular or religious nomenklaturas and/or oligarchies, such as emerged in South Africa under apartheid. The acquisition of destructive social power by any comprador-class and/or technocratic-experts, or the religious-top such as Khomeni in Iran, could similarly be impeded.

A popular ecumenical public sphere or telecommunication requires at least three components:

- a public media infrastructure that guarantees all religious groups structured access to local and national media facilities;

- congregations require the necessary training to enable them to make basic use of such facilities, and to understand possibilities for empowerment. A functioning public sphere requires media literacy. Thus religious educational facilities should give serious attention to developing and implementing media education programmes.

- active utilization of new high-tech communications technologies. The neo-Luddite notion that some technologies are only appropriate for the 'First (North) World' would result in retarded social and economic progress in Third World economies. Instead of Ludditeism — the rejection of new machines in the belief that they diminish employment - the 'South' requires openness to possibilities inherent in any and all technologies (see Media Development Vol 34, 4/1987).

The conventional churches have found that the making and transmission of magazine programmes and documentaries is more involving of community and communication than the "tub-thumping mass approach of the electronic church" (see Lowe, 1983:44). Watching TV, or listening to radio involves pleasure, and receivers will watch or listen to programmes about their own communities, especially if they have participated in their production. This is an empowering and communal experience which enhances communicative potential.

'Communication', 'access', 'participation' and 'community' are parts of a unified development process, connecting the concerns of local public spheres to questions of national development (see Nair & White, 1987). American televangelism, however, has been a conspicuous failure in terms of the theological concept of communication. It resists meaningful grassroots participation in the form of democratic decision-making and tele-ministry government, and some initiatives were destroyed by sex scandals and fraudulence.

Although relatively efficient at communicating uncontested messages to large numbers of people at once, televangelism creates the illusion of the spectators' own sense of agency in lateral communal relationships. The idea of 'community', then, is sacrificed in favour of an amorphous, atomised and authoritarianly directed mass emotionalism which discourages communal interactions in favour of C-M-R/S-O-E associations.

The statement by Dr Louw Alberts, chairman of Graham's 1991 crusade in South Africa, that "This is not mass evangelism, but personal evangelism on a mass scale", hardly addresses the issues of community and communal participation in which 'Us'- 'Them' differences are eliminated. Alberts's statement was made prior to the broadcasting of two one-hour sermons on SABC-TV in September 1991, expected to attract 18.1 million viewers (Whales 1991:26). Alberts' attempts to recuperate the personal through the 'mass' remains populist and top-down. The homo mechanicus method of "personal" preaching within the sports stadium — the local 'mass' — is reproduced on TV to the national 'mass', and perhaps even the international 'mass' through satellite transmissions.

Recalling Traber's six principles, we now apply our argument to micro-issues. The C-M-R/S-O-E commercial route may be feasible for the well-heeled televangelists (who in the US have used broadcasting to accumulate wealth and build their electronic empires). But this model fundamentally contradicts our theory of communication set out above, and may cost way in excess of what conventional churches and other religious institutions will be able, or be prepared, to afford.

The primacy of cost raises issues of the health of public broadcasting generally, and the role it plays in societies in which everything has become commoditised under the relations of late capitalism. The liberal notion of information as a public utility and social resource for the public good was steadily eroded during the onset of the information economy. Information once available to every citizen as a right is now only available at a price. This has fundamental implications for the principle of freedom of speech. Information that is thought will not generate profits will simply not be produced (Currey-Jansen 1988:7; Tomaselli 1989:30).

Televangelism, thus, in terms of its emphasis on income generation, is a form of commodity production and as such part of information capitalism. It is not part of the public service ethic. The growth of teleministries is similar to the entré of small firms in capitalist economies, eventually growing into large modern entrepreneurial corporations. They have since become multi-million dollar diversified conglomerates syndicating TV programmes and other media through the use of marketing techniques. Most crucial, argues Frankl (1987:142), "reciprocity between minister and audience has changed from sacred obligation to a system of personal rewards for the viewer". Viewers are promised success or material rewards for contributing to the teleministries (Frankl 1987:76; Abelman and Hoover 1990). Fund raising becomes the prime appeal of the teleministries to be able to sustain their stations, or the purchasing of airtime. Thus televangelism as homo mechanicus is also a form of homo economicus meshed with homo religiousis.

National Networking: Some Policy Options

With the continuing attacks on public broadcasting worldwide, now is the time for organised religious institutions to make unified proposals to ensure that:

• public service broadcasting (PSB) remains on national agendas. But even PSB often replicates homo mechanicus assumptions. Required is entrenchment of the practices of public access and affirmative access, if homo communicare is to be the principle.

• all denominations have access to their respective national public broadcasting organisations in direct proportion to the size of their relative constituencies. This principle will nevertheless ensure access for even the smallest of religious institutions.

• Reasonable blocks of air-time are allocated at no charge.

• Religious users should be free to make their own messages using the studio facilities, production technicians and technical advice of the national broadcaster. Religious broadcasters should not be intimidated by the 'mechanics' of the medium but rather excited by the potential for communication.

- Apart from a limited access (in terms of time) to the national broadcasting spectrum on the public broadcasting service, religious users should be able to negotiate access to both private and public regional and local radio and TV spectrums through existing stations, or through their own stations. Religious institutions in underdeveloped countries should aim to set up mobile radio stations to facilitate affirmative production by the marginalised of society (rural communities, squatters, minorities etc.). The question here is how to negotiate spectrum allocation between the demands of the wealthy televangelists and those religious broadcasters who aim at grassroots development, who may be much less well endowed. In this regard,

- institutions adhering to Traber's six principles should be given every co-operation, perhaps even preference, by broadcasting authorities and national broadcasters, as this approach addresses society as a whole within the communicare paradigm rather than just the narrow top-down objectives of the televangelists which are mainly aimed at the wealthy middle classes. In this way, religious institutions will be encouraged to become directly involved in social issues.

Local and Regional Networking

Religious media workers need to move away from the notion they are the originators of messages, and that the media are the source of information. Journalists should rather consider themselves as the facilitators of communication, the agents of homo communicare (see Richeri in Mattelart & Siegelaub,

1983:406-407). This is especially important in countries where decades of neo-fascist rule have stunted the development of indigenous democratic cultures (amongst both the ruling classes and many of the ruled).

It would be politically counter-productive if organised religion now abandoned its interventionist role in media affairs. With the commoditising fetish of information capitalism, support for democratic-communication projects is needed in the 1990s more than ever before. Vatican II Theology, for example, should not be confined to an oppositional mode, but needs to mobilise through the mainstream political spaces that the Church media helped open up and legitimise during the 1980s. Different kinds of intervention are now needed to re-establish the town square public sphere in the postmodern era. This has already occurred with regard to electronic mail on a global scale, but access other media remains prohibitively expensive.

At the local institutional level, the incorporation of the following points could provide a guide:

- Media resource centres (MRCs) staffed by trained media workers. Each MRC could be tailored to the local context, with congregations deciding for themselves the most appropriate media. For example, MRCs in very high density urban areas could stock all media technology and electronically network through local cable (see Media Development 34(4) 1987; Media Development 36(4) 1989; Festa & Santoro, 1987). MRCs in informal settlement areas of the Third World could develop local community radio stations and basic print media

(Media Development 37(4) 1990) examined various possibilities for using radio for local level democracy and development). MRCs in suburban areas (with lower urban population densities) could possibly emphasize community newspapers. In rural areas, MRC's could emphasize cassette tapes, or local community radio, or a combination of cassette tapes and radio.

- Religious media workers should help and train community members to make their own media (i) with technical advice; (ii) teaching equipment use; (iii) booking out the equipment; and (iv) servicing and maintaining the equipment;
- The resultant media can also be used to get messages through to the religious 'top'. In addition, the media can be shown to other communities and so serve as a catalyst for similar mobilising exercises there;
- the electronic public sphere empowers citizens to take control of their own lives and communities. Bluck (1984:37) notes in this regard: "Christians, of all people, have a vested interest in keeping things personal and protecting the authentic character of every human encounter". This value cuts to the heart of popular communication: let people speak for themselves. This should not merely be a paper right (as in the libertarian media model). Rather ALL sectors of society should be guaranteed resources and facilities to make their views known.

Conclusion

Communication is central to both the democratic and religious experiences. Both institutions tend towards top-down communication flows, wanting to control not only media channels, but also the messages transmitted, and often, the behaviour elicited. This is a fundamental betrayal of the theological relationship between communication and community, and usually results in elites who own and control communication technologies becoming distanced from the real needs of their constituencies. The resulting power relationship entrenches the elites and disempowers ordinary people. Ecumenical media need to become part of the solutions of the future, not rooted and forgotten in the past.

While the expensive and cumbersome communications technologies of the modernist era were difficult to use interactively, the new technologies can be used in fundamentally different ways, by ordinary people, under a variety of much more flexible circumstances. Religious communication practices need to exploit the advantages of the new technologies from grassroots to national levels.

Sites of public service and the public sphere are paradoxical in the Information Age: on the one hand are the extraordinary electronic technological developments which not only permit, but encourage interaction between communities of interest (homo communicare) from the local to the international; which elide space and time, culture and location. On the other, the economic relations which these technologies service simultaneously remove access from the public through price, regulatory and licensing mechanisms, and the unholy alliance between trans-national corporations and governments (Garnham 1986:38).

This counter-tendency of Homo mechanicus/economicus must be resisted by social institutions such as those organised around religion.

Notes

1. The ZANU (PF) government, for example, simply replaced the top-functionaries in the Rhodesian Broadcasting Corporation and retained the earlier communication-practices: pro-Smith toadying was substituted with pro-ZANU (PF) messages (Zaffiro 1983, 1986). Ten years after independence the broadcast media remained as inaccessible, autocratic and politically self-serving as they had been under white rule. Ironically, the Church press, which had opposed the Rhodesian regime by giving access to both ZAPU and ZANU, again offered spaces for oppositional voices, this time against ZANU (PK), after the 'revolution'.

2. Adapted from Mendelsohn (1989). Our application, however, offers a much more rigorous and consistent periodisation which we hope clarifies rather than muddles specific academic paradigms.

3. See., eg., Media Development (London) and Group Media Journal (Munich).

4. Some teleministries do, however, refer callers to churches in their area.

5. Billy Graham, amongst others, however, has not succumbed to such misconduct.

6. This section draws on Louw and Tomaselli (1991:12).

7. See Louw and Tomaselli (1991:13-15).

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