



Pope John Paul II and Media Effects Theory: Audiences and Messages Interface

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Abstract

Pope John Paul II encouraged people to make good use of the means of social communications to sustain positive impacts of contemporary media on audiences. A re-reading of Pope John Paul II's texts led me to the conclusion that he applied media effects theory to his reflections in social communications. What were the topics contained in the reflections of Pope John Paul II about impacts of media on the audiences, using missionary commitments in Catholic Church as a case study? This article examined selected texts of St. John Paul II on four major impacts of media: secularization in the world, power of new instruments of communication, globalization of communication, and visibility of the Church in the world of the twenty-first century. The article's analysis revealed that John Paul II's views about media effects were shaped by two-step flow theory of media effects.

Introduction

Conceptual perspectives of this article were based on the model of Mugridge and Gannon (2008), who carried out a systematic study of what they referred to as the social communication and theology of communication of St. John Paul II. These authors demonstrated that Pope John Paul II broadened the understanding of social communication in the Catholic Church (22-23)¹. I based this analysis on their

“traditional (doctrinal) perspective of social communications” to examine the adverse impact of

¹ Eilers (2009) argued that Mugridge and Gannon presented John Paul II as the precursor to the development of a theology of communication, but in reality, Pius XII had already provided an approach for examining social communication in his encyclical *Miranda Prorsus*, already provided an approach to examine social communications. According to Eilers, Pius XII did not specifically use the term theology of communication, but he had already established the basis to draft guidelines for the use of the social communication instruments. Pius XII's views influenced the content of the Decree *Inter Mirifica* of (Vatican II).

contemporary media² on the Church's mission, as observed in the writings of John Paul II. I modified "tradition" and "doctrine" cited in the Mugridge/Gannon model to "conceptual perspectives of social communications." I was interested in the following:

- A. Problems that Pope John Paul II attributed to the media's effects on evangelization
- B. Contributions of Pope John Paul II to social communications after Vatican II

My objective was to examine problems posed by media with regards to the faith-based audiences, as suggested by St. John Paul II.

Materials and Methods

The focus of this analysis was negative effects of contemporary media, although positive influences were examined briefly. For Pope John Paul II, the impact of social media on the Church's mission and society has been both positive (e.g., quick accessibility to information sources) and negative (e.g., the potential for modern media to become instruments of intimidation). As a positive acknowledgement, Pope John Paul II wrote the following in an apostolic letter to journalists and media users to clarify important components of social communication:

We give thanks to God for the presence of these powerful media which, if used by believers with the genius of faith and in docility to the light of the Holy Spirit, can facilitate the communication of the Gospel and render the bonds of communion among ecclesial

² John Paul II's writings often referred to the following media: Internet, YouTube, Twitter, the World Wide Web, television, radio, and newspapers

communities more effective. (Rapid Development, §6)

In this letter, John Paul II invited believers to use modern media as inspired by intellect and faith to proclaim the Gospel and increase the bond of communion among ecclesial communities and churches.

Through my rereading of the works of John Paul II (1991, 1993, 1999, 2002 and 2005)³, I noticed that his ideas about social communication appeared to have been prompted by issues such as globalization, secularization, audience influences, media content/effects, and visibility of the Catholic Church during the era of social media and, ultimately, the global power of contemporary media. Because some of these topics are relevant in media studies, communication studies, and social communications, I decided to examine critically the content of John Paul II's works regarding social communications.

I also aimed to describe a model for media effects that was behind St. John Paul II's media reflections. My analysis of the communication model of his works were based on the two-step flow theory, which suggested that messages flow uni-directionally from media sources through opinion leaders or media specialists prior to influencing the intended audiences. This perspective of communication theory held that opinion leaders couched messages in media in such ways that the content of messages influenced attitudes, behavior patterns, taste, and perceptions of their audiences (see Lowery and DeFleur, 1983; Baran and Davis, 2009; and Staubhaar, LaRose, and Davenport, 2009).

³ Eilers (2009) critiqued Mugridge and Gannon for omitting the most important work, *Redemptoris Missio*, with which John Paul II broadened the concept and offered a new perspective of Catholic social communication

Results and Discussions

After analyzing the content of John Paul II's writings about media effects on Church evangelization, I categorized his views on this subject according to four main topics: secularization throughout the world, the power of new communication instruments, globalization of communication, and diminished visibility of the Church in the 21st century. Each of the four themes were necessary to capture the Pope's entire media reflections. Given that some aspects of these themes were prominent in works of McGregor (2012), Barbey (2010), Kappeler (2009), Mugridge and Gannon (2008), Himes (2008), Zagacki (2001), and Melady (1999)⁴, I drew on them to guide my rereading of the works of Pope John Paul II.

Secularization throughout the world

Pope John Paul II was very friendly to media personnel throughout his pontificate, but he drew attention to his readers about the manner in which the media sometimes contributed to the ongoing accelerating secularization throughout the world. He described secularization in terms of "*de-Christianization within Christian countries*" (Redemptoris Missio, §36)⁵. Further, he stated the following:

This separation represents one of the most acute

⁴ These authors stated that John Paul II's understanding of media effects were shaped by one of these four main topics (see McGregor 2012, 79-80; Himes 2008, 270; LeTourneau 2004, 116; Lecomte 2003, 517; Zagacki 2001, 691-692; Melady 1999, 10-11; Coleman 1980, 545).

⁵ Zagacki noted that John Paul II was concerned with global secularization, stating, "In Poland and Cuba, John Paul saw nations twisting precariously in the grips of [the] secular—namely, Communist governments that had stifled citizens' political and religious freedoms" (2001:692). He observed that John Paul II wanted to find solutions to situations affecting the exercise of religion in these two countries.

pastoral concerns of the Church amid today's growing secularism, wherein many, indeed too many, people think and live "as if God did not exist." We are speaking of a mentality which affects, often in a profound, extensive and all-embracing way, even the attitudes and behavior of Christians, whose faith is weakened and loses its character as a new and original criterion for thinking and acting in personal, family, and social life. In a widely de-Christianized culture, the criteria employed by believers themselves in making judgments and decisions often appear extraneous or even contrary to those of the Gospel. (Veritatis Splendor, §88)

Pope John Paul II's communications in Veritatis Splendor offered a glimpse of his communication model regarding media effects. I expressed this model as follows:

Contemporary media → media agents → secularization in the world

For Pope John Paul II, contemporary media could be neutral channels of communication, but some media agents such as producers, media organizations, journalists, political systems and other stakeholders could disseminate content of messages through various media to influence their intended audiences. Pope John Paul II noted that secularization was an actual topic that media agents referred to whenever they presented their messages to their audiences. This situation prompted Pope John Paul II's reflections on the impact of media on evangelization.

Zagacki (2001) observed that one of the commitments of John Paul II in the field of social communications boiled down to finding an adequate and effective means to overcome the acceleration of secularization through

the media⁶. According to Melady (1999), Pope John Paul II used modern media with unprecedented amplitude to overcome effects of secularization:

Because he has travelled more frequently and extensively than any other modern pope, John Paul II's overseas visits, their technique, forms and practices are a style of communicating that the pope has stamped on his papacy [...] designed to meet the crisis posed by increased secularization. (Melady, 1999: 11)

Melady (1999) also noted that secularization made it difficult for the Catholic Church to promote its teachings in the public sphere⁷. Melady stated that the pastoral visits of Pope John Paul II represented a new horizon in social communications aimed to fill the chasm created by secularization in the public sphere.

Pope John Paul II's views about modern media's accelerating effects on secularization vis-a-vis the Catholic evangelization validated the two-step flow model of communication elaborated by Lazarsfeld (1947), Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), and Katz (1957).

My analysis of selected texts of Pope John Paul II revealed that he was convinced that just as some professionals and journalists fed the content of modern media with lifestyle options and information, the Church could create content for modern media to reach out to its audiences. Thus, Pope John Paul II's ideas

⁶ According to Formicola (2005), themes at the heart of John Paul II's reflections and speeches included freedom of religion, respect for human dignity, and political justice. Formicola described how John Paul II spoke about these topics through the media.

⁷ See Marchessault, G. Médias et foi chrétienne. Deux univers à concilier. Québec: Les Éditions Fides, 2002; Médiathèque. Les médias. Textes des Églises. Paris: Centurion, 1990; Melady, M. B. M. The rhetoric of Pope John Paul II. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 1999.

contributed to validate a two-step flow model of media effects in social communications.

Power of new instruments of communication

The powerful influence of modern media was another issue that St. John Paul II discussed in his reflections about communications. The power of media here referred to the ability of media to influence a sequence of events or behavior patterns. Pope John Paul II spoke to journalists about the critical effects of the power of media:

The world of journalism is undergoing a period of profound changes. The proliferation of new technologies now affects all areas and concerns [and], to a greater or lesser extent, human beings. Globalization has increased the capacity of the means of social communications, but [it has] also increased their vulnerability to ideological and commercial pressures. This should lead you, you journalists, to ask yourselves about the meaning of your vocation as Christians involved in the world of communication. (John Paul II as cited by Mahieu 2005, 345)

Pope John Paul II feared some barriers of media (e.g., uncontrolled access to information, lack of confidentiality, and unedited information on web sites), which could propagate in the presence of other catalysts such as “ideologies,” “the desire for profit or for power,” “rivalries and conflicts between individuals and groups,” and “human weakness and social disorders” (Rapid Development, §13). He called on media agents and users to ensure that these barriers were diminished. Moreover, John Paul II forewarned that virtual world orchestrated by powerful unintended impact of the internet could decrease interpersonal contact in the real world:

The fact that through the Internet people multiply their contacts in ways hitherto unthinkable opens up wonderful possibilities for spreading the Gospel. But it is also true that electronically mediated relationships can never take the place of the direct human contact required for genuine evangelization. For evangelization always depends upon the personal witness of the one sent to evangelize (cf. Romans 10: 14-15). How does the Church lead from the kind of contact made possible by the Internet to the deeper communication demanded by Christian proclamation? (Internet: A New Forum for Proclaiming the Gospel, §5)

John Paul II feared that the Internet and cyberspace could have antisocial and inhuman effects on some audiences:

Despite its enormous potential for good, some of the degrading and damaging ways in which the Internet can be used are already obvious to all, and public authorities surely have a responsibility to guarantee that this marvelous instrument serves the common good and does not become a source of harm. (Internet: A New Forum for Proclaiming the Gospel, §4)

Pope John Paul II was concerned that the Internet had a solid grip on the psychology of individuals in the sense that modern media could influence behavior because of the easy access to online information⁸. He was concerned that individuals could lose their ability to think critically, and to choose the best option according to the “scale of values” available to them (Internet: A

⁸ John Paul II was not the only person who discussed media effects on audiences. Recupero *et al.* (2008) and Fiedorowicz and Chigurupati (2009) attested that Internet content affected the mental states of individuals by inspiring, for example, harmful thoughts under certain conditions because of accessible material in cyber space.

New Forum for Proclaiming the Gospel, 4).

He argued that problems related to the powerful impact of media were enough to motivate authorities, producers, professionals, and users of media to develop protective measures to ensure that new means of social communication contribute to the common good in an informed and just way.

Pope John Paul II believed that the influence of the content of the Internet could reduce the voice of the Gospel and the face of the ultimate good:

The Internet causes billions of images to appear on millions of computer monitors around the planet. From this galaxy of sight and sound will the face of Christ emerge and the voice of Christ be heard? For it is only when his face is seen and his voice heard that the world will know the glad tidings of our redemption. This is the purpose of evangelization. And this is what will make the Internet a genuinely human space, for if there is no room for Christ, there is no room for man. (Internet: A New Forum for Proclaiming the Gospel, §6)

Pope John Paul II believed that when the Church offered pastoral ministry and messages in and through the content of modern media, its evangelization activities could shape the minds of audiences just as ideologies of counter authorities and media producers powerfully influenced behavior patterns of media audiences. In this sense, Pope John Paul II consistently followed a two-step flow model about media’s effects on audiences.

Globalization of communication

The impact of globalization of communication on audiences of evangelization was one of the issues that

occupied the thoughts of Pope John Paul II. *He indicated that globalization was “a phenomenon” and “a process made inevitable by increasing communication between the different parts of the world, leading practically to reducing distances, with evident effects in widely different fields.” Additionally, he defined this phenomenon as “[a process] ruled merely by the laws of the market solely outlined by the powerful” (Ecclesia in America, §20).*

In examining the impact of the Internet and new means of global and social communications, Pope John Paul II acknowledged:

There is also the possibility that it will in fact aggravate existing inequalities as the information and communications gap widens. How can we ensure that the information and communications revolution which has the Internet as its award-winning engine will work in favor of the globalization of human development and solidarity objectives closely linked to the Church’s evangelizing mission? (Internet: A New Forum for Proclaiming, §5)

For John Paul II, the globalization of means of communication increased media-related problems. He warned believers against subtle pitfalls of global media. But he also stated, *“our own times offer the Church new opportunities in this field: we have witnessed the collapse of oppressive ideologies and political systems, the opening of frontiers, and the formation of a more united world due to an increase in communications” (Redemptoris Missio, §3).*

By examining the link between globalization and the media, Pope John Paul II continued the commitment of Vatican II by inviting the Church to think critically about the magnitude of globalization and its impact on

the Church’s mission in the 21st century.

John Paul II’s two-way flow model enabled him to understand how the global market, powerful groups, and certain oppressive systems used modern media to widen the communication gap and foster inequality in the world. An understanding of the link between globalization and modern media inspired John Paul II to invite the Church to use the same media to evangelize and witness to the values of the Church’s teachings.

Diminishing visibility of the Church in the contemporary world

The declining visibility of the Catholic Church throughout the world in the 21st century was another major issue that Pope John Paul II examined. Pope John Paul II addressed this problem in social communications within the Catholic Church during the post-conciliar period, as described by Ruzskowski (1988) and Kappeler (2009).

In my opinion, visibility, as a phenomenon, is distinct from the other three major issues even though it is clarified and nurtured by them. Visibility is a tangible, sacred sign and an observable religious presence in the public sphere. The other three issues can be seen as external forces that had impacts on the Church in the world. Pope John Paul II observed:

The first form of witness is the very life of the missionary of the Christian family and of the ecclesial community, which reveal a new way of living. The missionary, who, despite all his or her human limitations and defects, lives a simple life, taking Christ as the model, is a sign of God and of transcendent realities. But everyone in the Church, striving to imitate the Divine Master, can and must bear this kind of

witness; in many cases it is the only possible way of being a missionary. (Redemptoris Missio, §42)

According to Lecomte (2003), the biggest media-related issue Pope John Paul II discussed was the visibility of the Church in the world:

Beyond the popular press, all of the organs of press, including the most serious, have sacrificed fashionable people: it gives more to think than to see; it develops more ideas, it tells stories, it no longer seeks to reveal the truth, but to elicit the emotion. The consequence that follows for the Church is that only religious topics which are now accessing screens revolve around people known as “media personalities” like Mother Teresa, Dom Helder Camara, or, in France, the Abbé Pierre. John Paul II is distressed by this phenomenon [of lack of visibility] (Lecomte, 2003: 517)

McLuhan (1964) predicted that, despite developments in means of communication, there would be a return to popular literature such as storytelling, historical genre, and other narratives. However, as Lecomte pointed out, the stories recaptured in modern media often did not include Bible stories or the history of salvation. I observed that Pope John Paul II wanted to integrate Biblical narratives into popular stories of conveyed in contemporary media. McGregor (2012), for example, defined Redemptoris Missio of Pope John Paul II as an assessment of the problems and challenges diminishing the visibility in the world:

In Redemptoris Missio, he specifically identified new evangelization with the re-evangelization of nations which had, to a large extent, lost their Christian faith. He portrayed this “re-evangelization” as a response to the spread of religious indifference, secularism, and atheism in many nations where Christian faith and life

had formerly flourished, as well as [...] the separation of faith and culture. This preliminary analysis indicates that John Paul II saw new evangelization as a response to a new situation. He saw the Church faced with new challenges in the form of secularism, atheism, religious indifference, the separation of faith and culture, and the growth of poverty and injustice in many parts of the world. Also, he saw that the Church was developing a new awareness of its need to respond to these challenges by deepening the faith of Christians and their witness to the Gospel, as well as creating new societies that embody the truths of the Gospel. (McGregor, 2012: 79-80)

McGregor also considered Redemptoris Missio as a reflection aimed at suggesting various ways to increase visibility of the Church throughout the world. Pope John Paul II’s reflections on visibility of the Church and modern media illustrated a two-way flow model of communication.

Recommendations

Pope John Paul II contributed to ongoing reflections on the two-way flow model of communication. Zagacki (2001) observed that John Paul II encouraged media agents to provide media content that could help reduce the rapid growth of secularization in the world. As exemplar, Pope himself engaged with this effort through media coverage of his pastoral activities and travels throughout the world.

Pope John Paul II suggested four strategies that would allow better mastery over the powerful influences of modern media: (a) know the media; (b) use the media; (c) control aspects such as language, nature, and characteristics of media; and 4. offer pastoral principles to media professionals. According to Le Tourneau

(2004), John Paul II used modern means of communication to overcome powerful and spontaneous effects created among Internet users:

In 1987, the Pope recites the Rosary in mondovision. At Tours, he inaugurated the web site for the conference of Bishops of France (1996). On March 24, 1997, he held the presentation at a site of the Holy See and, on May 13, 2000, at Fatima, he led the first “cyber-beatification.” John Paul II sends a message for the first time in the Internet world in 2001... The Pope regularly sends a message during the world day of social communications, convinced that cultures and consciences [are] facing a new world of images and sounds (Le Tourneau, 2004:116).

Pope John Paul II also called on members of the Church to adapt media for pastoral ministry to current media audiences, agents and cultures (Rapid Development, 8). Pope John Paul II encouraged Christians to demonstrate vigilance and to use critical minds with respect to the persuasive force of media content (Rapid Development, 13). Additionally, John Paul II observed:

Indeed, there is already a real noticeable danger that [...] man should lose the essential threads of his dominion and in various ways let his human nature be subjected to the world and become himself something subject to manipulation in many ways—even if the handling is often not noticeable directly—through the whole of the organization of community life, through the production system and through pressure from the means of social communication. (Redemptor Hominis, §16)

Thus, John Paul II suggested that pastoral training and education would be options to add additional

dimensions and horizons to the skills of producers, professionals, and users of modern media so that they would assume their moral responsibility for promoting the contemporary means of social communications. He also encouraged the Church to make use of the opportunity of contemporary media to evangelize or re-evangelize the world, in order to catch on the visibility of the Church in the world.

Having discussed Pope John Paul II’s views about the four topics associated with media effects and some of the solutions he offered to strengthen Catholic Church’s evangelization commitments, I examined his social communications on the basis of three perspectives: the communication model, theoretical stance, and scope.

The communication model connected to the views of Pope John Paul II was the two-step flow model of media effects. He perceived media effects in terms of the following: media → agents → audiences. He was convinced that contemporary media per se were neutral and amoral technology tools for mediating information. However, he believed that all media agents (e.g., producers, media owners, journalists, media institutions, economic/political systems, and ideological groups) could use media to provide content that could impact social behavior, attitudes, thought, and lifestyles of audiences of media messages. Thus, Pope John Paul II called for ethical values and actions to guide those who communicate messages to audiences through contemporary media. He hoped that ethical codes could guide agents of media in making available, with conscious effort, the best content for the common good. As for audiences, Pope John Paul II’s texts revealed that he considered them as passive recipients whose minds were tabula rasa, shaped by the content of agents’ messages, or engaged by media

agents⁹.

The theoretical stance of Pope John Paul II's social communications drew on teachings of Vatican II regarding the three munera of the Church: prophetic, priestly, and kingly functions (see *Lumen Gentium* of Vatican II, 31, 35). For example, his *Splendor Veritatis* built on topics in *Lumen Gentium* 1, 12, 16, 25, 36, which explained the Church's mission of proclaiming the Gospel. His *Ecclesia in America* referred to *Lumen Gentium* 2, 10, 11, 26, 23, 29, 31, 34, and 50. His *Redemptoris Missio* cited *Lumen Gentium* 1, 4, 5, 6-9, 13, 14-17, 23, 28, 31, 35, 38, and 48. With these backgrounds, Pope John Paul II developed systematic reflections for social communications in which he considered all Catholics as agents to provide the Gospel to the world through modern media, as a continuation of the prophetic (teaching), priestly (consecrating), and kingly (governing) roles of Christ.

Pope John Paul II believed that the most efficient and effective way for the Church to continue this universal mission in contemporary times was to use modern media. The recurrent themes in Vatican II texts that he included in his media models were the universal mission, proclamation of the Gospel, agents of evangelization, media polemics, teachers of the faith, and the hierarchical status of the Church. Pope John Paul II's views about the Church's three roles in evangelization led to Kappeler's mistaken conclusion that "during the 1980s and 1990s, the dazzling media and communication teaching of John Paul II were used solely for the purpose of securing the administrative or the kingly office of the Vatican [...] The closed model assumed that communication is one-way, downward"

⁹ See Gauntlett (2007; 2005); Chomsky (2002); and Barker and Petley (2001).

(2009: 201). Although John Paul II discussed the hierarchical structure inherent in the governing office of the Church, his communication model incorporated a broader theoretical spectrum of Vatican II documents.

John Paul II contributed to the scope of social communications and models of media effects. Kappeler described Pope John Paul II's media views as "reflective thought" within the Catholic Church at the end of the 20th century. He added that Pope John Paul II "probed the dramatic changes which took place in the sphere of information and communication during the late twentieth century. [He] viewed the Church as a mass medium able to gather enormous flocks and thus create a mass hearing for face-to-face communication" (2009: 111).

John Paul II built his understanding of media effects on the two-step flow model of communication and teachings of Vatican II. From my critical analysis, I noticed that John Paul II explained such effects in terms of a two-way flow of communication, but he provided solutions to overcoming unintended media effects, based on the use theory of communication. His reflections and suggestions often stressed how the Church and its members could use modern media to carry out information and interaction with others (see Davenport, LaRose and Straubhaar, 2010; Baran and Davis 2009; Busselle and Bilandzic, 2009). His reflections contributed to broadening the theoretical horizons and communication models in the Church's social communications.

Conclusion

In this article, I have analyzed John Paul II's views about the adverse effects of media on Catholic evangelization throughout the world by examining the content of selected texts from his writings. I noted that

John Paul II held that various stakeholders (e.g., journalists, social institutions, politico-economic systems, and ideological groups) created media content to influence their audiences. This research is focused on two aspects of John Paul II's works on social communications: problems he associated with media effects on the Church's evangelization mission and his contributions to social communications during the post-Vatican II era of the Church.

I organized this analysis into four main topics: secularization throughout the world, the power of new communication instruments, globalization of communication, and diminished visibility of the Church in the 21st century. According to McGregor, Pope John Paul II "saw the Church faced with new challenges in the form of secularism, atheism, and religious indifference, [and] the separation of faith and culture" and proposed new methods for evangelizing through the use of modern media (2010: 79-80). This analysis was centered on the content of John Paul II's writings (1991, 1993, 1999, 2002, and 2005), in which he systematically discussed media's effects on evangelization. Four problems associated with these effects and proposed solutions for overcoming them according to Pope John Paul II's social communication models were examined in this study, along with John Paul II's contributions to the Church's understanding of how modern media actually works.

To conclude, it was evident from my research that the thoughts of Pope John Paul II on social communications related to the themes of his pontificate, including evangelizing through modern media. Pope John Paul II viewed the Church as an agent sent by Christ to continue his mission of forming and informing audiences throughout the world. He believed that Catholic agents of evangelization should

use modern media to support the Church's mission, and he acknowledged that agents outside of the religious sphere were competing and contradicting that mission. This situation led him to develop measures to promote social communications as part of the Church's continuing mission. Barbey (2010) argued that Pope John Paul II's ideas about social communications confirmed the Catholic Church's position regarding the power and influence of media. John Paul II would have set the tone for dialogues within the domains of scholarly media and communication studies if he had referred to the works of a few relevant authors (like Davenport, LaRose and Straubhaar, 2010; Baran and Davis, 2009; Busselle and Bilandzic, 2009) whose discussions included media effects, media consumption, communication models, media institutions, and media contents. Pope John Paul II's thoughts about modern media were limited to missiology, theology, and ecclesiology of the Catholic Church. In summary, experts who were consulted for this research agreed that the 27-year pontificate of John Paul II marked an important broadening of the understanding of social communications in the Catholic Church.

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