

Gospel meets media

David Balzer

The minister read his line, and then looked expectantly at the congregation for a heart-warming choral response, only to be met with a few scattered syllables and silence. Why was no one participating in the responsive reading? He repeated the line, coming to rest on the last word with an emphatic raising of the eyebrows, cuing the congregation as a conductor would cue an orchestra. Again, only a smattering of voices answered.

Everyone, it seemed, was turned to the flurry of activity in the corner – to the person frantically flipping overhead transparencies onto the projector perched on the organ bench. Recognizing the futility of his efforts, the minister joined the congregation and turned towards the commotion.

Gospel meet media . . . media meet gospel.

Although media is pervasive in our culture, it has an uncanny tendency to become invisible. We don't really notice it. But it's there. And we're all touched by it. I can't think of a time I'm not sending or receiving words, signs, symbols, and their meanings. If media is about methods and means of communicating, we're all in this together.

As a producer and consumer, I have an intimate relationship with media. I also have an intimate relationship with Christ. Both relationships are essential and complex – and it's clear we've got some relationship issues to talk about. The following scenarios¹ may help launch the conversation.

Scenario #1: Wireless (dis)connections

My cell phone contract came up for renewal last week and I received a wonderful offer in the mail inviting me to pick a new phone for \$0. As I was browsing through new models from Chocolate, LG, and RAZR, I noticed how incredibly thin cell phones are and how much information is packed into one little computer chip.

The amazement lasted right up until my first phone call when the attempted conversation kept cutting in and out. There's a reason why mp3 audio files are identified by "sample rate" compressions. A portable media device is able to pack so much into so little because it's offering only a "sampling" of the original frequencies.

Compare your latest RAZR experience with what Paul offers in his rousing conclusion of **1 Corinthians 13**: "For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known" (**13:12**).

If we look forward with anticipation to one day being face-to-face with the presence of God, isn't it appropriate to strive for a foretaste here on earth by nurturing intimate, localized, face-to-face relationships? In our mediated world, we may think our secondlife.com is virtually the same as our first life. We may be tempted to exchange face-to-face for Facebook. We may come to believe that hosted reality is the same as hospitality.

But if we want to live redemptively, there's no substitute for meeting in person, no matter what the medium. The best that media technology can do is extend a relationship – it can never create one. Eventually we'll say, "I'd like to meet this person and see what they're really like."

Given media's inherent "thinness," we must ask how media production and consumption can enhance our embodied relationships. How much face-time does our rate plan include?

Scenario #2: Amplifying the message

The clip must have been only 2–3 minutes long. From the tight camera angles you could tell she was sitting in a very small one-room suite. As the light from the balcony window fell across her face, it drew out the beautiful contours of her wrinkled complexion. She quietly told her story of faith and doubt, spanning her eighty-plus years, musing aloud about the mysteries of hearing God and the God who hears.

Perhaps it was the stunning declaration of God's glorious creation captured in the contours of those wrinkles, or perhaps it was the unexpected candour of her words shattering stereotypes, but for those few moments media became gospel to us as we were graced by the presence of the Almighty.

There was far more at play than met the eye in that video story. Created in the image of God (**Genesis 1:26–27**) and commissioned to tend all of creation (**Genesis 2:15**) we are invited to be stewards of symbolic power. We are entrusted with the care of words, signs and their meanings, to co-create culture with God in a way that brings life.² Whenever our Anabaptist sensibilities prod us to join Jesus in his mission of hearing the cries of the poor, seeing the blind, and assisting the oppressed (**Luke 4:18**), we participate in his grand redemptive project.

In order for the three-minute video clip to happen, someone had to recognize that a media producer's biblical mandate is to empower the voiceless and produce "out of the margins," as I like to call it. In this instance, media bridged complexities of mobility and delivery, and addressed weakness by amplifying a marginalized and silenced voice of faith. No wonder high

school students and young adults commented on the surprising spiritual encouragement they found in hearing their own fears and hopes in the voice of an 80-year-old woman.

Even the simplest acts of carefully crafted amplification in a local congregation can prophetically call people into new life. Media's inherent capacity to amplify invites us to ask if we're turning up the volume on God's agenda.

As we consider the unrelenting and intimate relationship between media and gospel, let's ask ourselves a closing question, one that Jesus frequently asked: Do we have ears to hear and eyes to see? The relationship between gospel and media can bring both life and death. It will be the ongoing opportunity and challenge of the producing and consuming church to discern the difference.

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1. All seeming allusions to real life experiences in this article are intentional; they did happen and aren't meant to be hypothetical. If you feel a certain affinity to any one of these scenarios . . . welcome to the conversation.
 2. See Quentin J. Schultze, *Communicating for Life: Christian Stewardship in Community and Media* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2000), 17–30, for a helpful elaboration of the meaning of symbolic stewardship.

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