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# Mass Media and the Future of Preaching

DUANE MEHL

Contemporary electronic media threaten the stability of words, the ability of words to stay put in our culture. Since society depends on a common organization of words and word symbols for orderly function and for the transmission of tradition from generation to generation, the new media profoundly affect the very nature of our culture.

Electronic media provide information all at once in multiple sensory dimensions and consequently seem to alter our perception of reality, particularly of order within that which we perceive as reality. Even the mechanical movie projector, by moving a series of still photos at an appropriate speed, managed before the advent of electronic media to kill both the orderly short story and the novel. The literary disciplines admit with candor that the novel in written form is open to further experimentation only insofar as the written style and even the configuration of pagination mimic the film, the radio program, or the relaxed and cluttered environment of the television medium.

For instance, the New York artist and journalist Tom Wolfe writes in the "style" of the disk jockey, the magazine advertisement, the dance choreographer, and even the plain tactile experience of the street.

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If he writes about a marching band, the sentences are likely to march across and down the page, thus offering a more rounded or total experience of communication to the viewer-reader.

So-called nonbooks such as McLuhan's *The Medium Is the Massage*,<sup>1</sup> Abingdon's new *Rock 2000*,<sup>2</sup> Firnhaber's *Say Yes*,<sup>3</sup> have almost a tedium about them now. forms with visual, synthetic-auditory, and even tactile stimuli woven together between two covers. Inevitably such experiments will be paperback and disposable, revealing their close relationship with electronic media, the content of which is by essence disposable—though it may be republished, rerun, or one might say, re-disposed a myriad times over.

To say that electronic media subvert man's attempts at order and system, qualities inherent in the orderly printed word, may by now seem a truism even among those of us who resist the truth. McLuhan's oracles, the writings of Boulding and Barnouw or of Wittgenstein and the linguistic analysts, or even the writings of many earlier literary critics and artists, such as T. S. Eliot—so startling a generation ago—and Habel's *Interrobang*<sup>4</sup> are hybrid media

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<sup>1</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium Is the Massage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1967).

<sup>2</sup> *Rock 2000*, ed. H. H. Ward (New York: Abingdon Press, 1969).

<sup>3</sup> R. Paul Firnhaber, *Say Yes*, No. 6 in "The Perspective Series" (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968).

<sup>4</sup> Norman Habel, *Interrobang* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969).

For instance, McLuhan from *The Medium Is the Massage*:

Until writing was invented, man lived in acoustic space: boundless, directionless, horizonless, in the dark of the mind, in the world of emotion, by primordial intuition, by terror. Speech is a social chart of this bog.

The goose quill put an end to talk. It abolished mystery; it gave architecture and towns; it brought roads and armies, bureaucracy. It was the basic metaphor with which the cycle of civilization began, the step from dark into the light of the mind.<sup>5</sup>

Or:

Ours is a brand-new world of allatonce-ness. "Time" has ceased, "space" has vanished. We now live in a *global* village . . . a simultaneous happening. We are back in acoustic space. We have begun again to structure the primordial feeling, the tribal emotions from which a few centuries of literacy divorced us.

We have had to shift our stress of attention from action to reaction. We must now know in advance the consequences of any policy or action, since the results are experience without delay. . . .

Unhappily we confront this new situation with an enormous backlog of outdated mental and psychological responses. We have been left d-a-n-g-l-i-n-g. Our most impressive words and thoughts betray us—they refer us only to the past, not to the present.<sup>6</sup>

Curiously, the first words of Armstrong from the moon were distributed to the press before they were spoken. What does this event do to our "perception" and "feel" for time. Which is more real . . .

<sup>5</sup> McLuhan, p. 48.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

the press release or the spoken or incarnate words which came after?

Perhaps we now understand or experience McLuhan and others in the linguistic-literary-communication fields so easily because the hints, the straws, were in the wind from the Renaissance forward, from the time of Copernicus, Galileo, Michelangelo, Francis Bacon. In the early 17th century John Donne wrote about Bacon:

And new philosophy calls all in doubt,  
The element of fire is quite put out;  
The Sun is lost, and th' earth, and no  
man's wit

Can well direct him where to look for it.  
'Tis all in peeces, all cohaerence gone;  
All just supply, and all Relation.<sup>7</sup>

What Donne called philosophy was scientific empiricism in infancy. His fears over the disappearance of coherence, supply, and relation were echoed again and again by giants such as Shakespeare (cosmic and social *order* are central concerns, almost obsessions, in most of his works), Goethe, Kant, Pope, Schleiermacher, and Wordsworth. Already in the 19th century Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky, and Nietzsche were giving the world an idea of what capitulation to apparent chaos in nature and history would mean for those who chose to exist with eyes unblinking in the face of chaos.

In our own century T. S. Eliot attempted with excruciating labor to overcome what he called the modern divorce between sense and sensibility (sensory perception), but with results uncongenial to the modern temperament. We who are called to ar-

<sup>7</sup> John Donne, "An Anatomie of the World," *The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Donne*, ed. Charles M. Coffin (New York: Modern Library, 1952), p. 191.

ticulate the Christian tradition in a world oriented to immanent perception and organization of data may end our days in the painful and awkward posture of the poet of *Four Quartets*:

So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years —

Twenty years largely wasted, the years of *l'entre deux guerres* —

Trying to use words, and every attempt Is wholly a new start, and a different kind of failure

Because one has only learnt to get the better of words

For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which

One is disposed to say it. And so each venture

Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate

With shabby equipment always deteriorating

In a general imprecision of feeling, Undisciplined squads of emotion.<sup>8</sup>

Twenty years hence we may have to lament in the same vein, having experienced far more than two wars, to lament perhaps like the hippies or the charismatics with inchoate words, or without words, inarticulating the inarticulate, falling a length shorter than the mournful poet of the *Quartets*.

Current speech patterns among teenagers and young adults nurtured on 16,000 hours of TV and 5,000 hours of rock in contrast to 12,000 hours of *formal* education indicate that our sense of unease is not without foundation. The number of times the average youth under 25 assures

<sup>8</sup> From T. S. Eliot, "East Coker," in *Four Quartets*, copyright 1943. Reprinted by permission of Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc.

us that "you know" presages a startling decline in ability or desire to manipulate the mother tongue in plain and orderly ways. It is as if the youth expects us to anticipate by extrasensory perception (or consummate multiple *sensory* perception) that which he is *not* about to say. If we love the written word, or perhaps the sonnet, an attempt to induce further order into an already orderly progression of words on a page, we may feel in the company of the young like Alice behind the looking glass, confronting persons who make statements apropos to nothing, who reply to questions never raised, who disappear like the Cheshire cat when we move closer for orderly conversation.

Much of the so-called stoned humor and literature of the sixties, as well as pop, op, soft, hard, or plastic art spoofs our inability to make words apropos to data accumulated by our senses or by our scientists. Contemporary humor or song lyrics bend time, space, and our feeling for causality, to persuade us that reality is obsolete, merely an invention of mass media.

Hence, the Beatle type of joke best known in this country through the Smothers Brothers. Question: Why don't you like Donald Duck? Answer (dead pan): I could never understand him. Or Audrie Guthrie: What did that man say to you? Answer: I don't know. I'm deaf. Or one man to another on the street corner — First man: You have a carrot in your ear. Second man: You'll have to speak louder. I have a carrot in my ear.

Dick Martin's invisible Uncle Willard on "Laugh-In" is a vehicle for the new oral tradition. Martin: Say hello to my

invisible Uncle Willard. Rowan: Say hello? I can't even see him. Martin (with delighted childlike smile): Oh, *you* can't either.

The clue to stoned humor is a comradeship of unreality—a growing community experience, especially among the youth who agree on little except that previous perceptions of symbols of reality have largely ceased to inform their perceptions. Their speech is a "social chart of the bog." J. Marks, the New York writer, has got it down: "The key to the new humor is: 'Small truths (such as people are visible) are ridiculous because they are only cover-ups for big lies.'" <sup>9</sup>

Black satire, such as we find already in Swift and Carroll, has always functioned with Marks' methodological principle. Morley's and Estes' explanation for their portrait painting of a photograph is a case study: "The people in this portrait look more like who they are in the painting than they do in real life." Find the "real environment" in that statement! Or John Lennon's doggerel in *In his own write*:

I sat belonely down a tree, humbled fat  
and small,  
A little lady sing to me, I couldn't see at  
all.<sup>10</sup>

Lennon encapsulates the paradox of new media. We see everything at once and receive, as a single tribe, experiences available to a number of senses, but in contrast to a primitive tribe find the whatness of communication subverted by the rapidity

<sup>9</sup> J. Marks, "The New Humor," *Esquire*, LXXIII (December 1969), 200.

<sup>10</sup> John Lennon, *In his own write* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965), quoted by permission.

of the experience, by the speed-of-light displacement of one experience by yet another and another and another. The faster and the more diffusedly the medium functions, the more fully the medium becomes the message; we have no time to settle down behind the media to discover what the message might be. Such intellectual undertakings require reflection and economy of data, and neither is allowed or provided by electronic media.

Books not only have an author but a table of contents, solid and unmoving. We study the table and contents at our leisure. TV has directors, choreographers, set designers (which are crucial since a three-dimensional illusion is created on the flat, two-dimensional surface of the TV image by juxtaposition of objects in the environment of the image), and perhaps an author who coughs up words for trial use in the "allatonce" and "onlyonce" happening. TV ads are an exception, since we are to acquire them exactly, by osmosis, much as we once acquired nursery rhymes. For the sake of clarity and absolute uniformity the buyer demands careful writing, blocking, memorization, and even cue cards for the actors in a commercial.

In spectacular contrast, many contemporary Broadway plays come into being through the creative instincts of a director who directs experiences which exist only for the duration of the performance or happening. If we like the experience we praise the director, not the author who may have produced some words for trial but did not create or "write" the play. Directors in Living Theater or Jerzy Grotowsky, director of the Polish Laboratory group, use no scripts. Words get in the way of spontaneous, therefore "real," ex-

perience of the performers and audience. Grotowsky declares against literature as Susan Sontag declares against the "interpretation" of graphic art happenstance. When the form of the happenstance is set down in print or "interpreted," it loses its dynamic—it becomes static.

Some theater groups eliminate audiences altogether lest the wooden spectator get in the way of the dynamic experience of the performers. Shades of the medieval mass without a congregation? Perhaps Walter Ong, who sees a correlation between the wedding of TV image and viewer into one cultic community, and the medieval wedding of God and man through sacraments drawing upon all human senses and sense-making capacities, is on to something.

In rapid-fire fashion I wish to indicate some implications of electronic media for preaching in the church and in the process offer strong encouragement for new media courses on undergraduate and graduate levels in contemporary theological curricula. The poet Stephen Spender in *The Struggle of the Modern*,<sup>11</sup> says that every contemporary poet must create a new universe into which he places the symbols for each of his poems. I believe we must impose similar disciplines upon professional communicators within the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, recognizing that the word church (as well as the words holy, catholic, and even one) is one of the word symbols for which the communicator must recapture a universe or a sensible setting.

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Spender, *The Struggle of the Modern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963).

Spender speaks in hyperbole, recognizing that we do not experience in our age a total gap between generations or between two district sensoriums, an old and a new. Nonetheless, we cannot take the symbolic or transcendent capacity of any word for granted in our times, whether that word be as abstract as the word God, or as concrete as the word chair. If the poet today wishes to use either the word God or the word chair with sensible meaning, he must convey through the dynamics of his poetry the chairness of the word chair and the godness of the word God. The preacher faces no less a challenge. He must find ways to convey through the dynamics of his words and the interrelations of words the sensible reality embodied in such ancient "carriers of meaning" as God, Christ, Holy Spirit, reconciliation, redemption, salvation, sacrament, heaven, hell, faith, hope, love. In order to reach with words a people accustomed to communication through total sensory stimuli enwrapped in the convincing and attractive environments of electronic media, we must be able to unwrap and enwrap in similarly convincing and attractive ways the great words in which our Christian tradition is stored.

We shall not find TV or the contemporary magazine especially useful in our task. These modern media forms have been wedded to man's lust for power and brute sexual satisfaction (primarily through ads). Such thrusts are by now of the essence of the media. The prophetic complaint of the Old Testament seems to preclude any modern attempt at utilizing the sacred groves of TV and magazine as basic bearers of the Good News.

Curiously, radio lends itself to Christian proclamation because it is a hot or direct medium (I would prefer to call it a lean or ascetic medium). It gives the spoken word extra clarity, spareness, sharpness, as disk jockeys, folk and country singers, and evangelists have discovered. Since the future of FM is luminous, the communicator within the church will continue to labor assiduously with the radio medium. It will be advisable also for the communicator to acquire some feel for the TV environment in order to discover limitations of usage. At present the churches are able at best to produce high quality movies for TV; at worst they televise ritual worship services. For those who believe firmly in the reality of God and man and the possibility of hand-to-hand relationship between the two, the TV image seems more a roadblock than a vehicle for actual communion or community ritual worship.

But fundamentally we preachers shall

continue to spend the greater part of our time unwrapping and then enwrapping the words of our faith in sensible ways for sermons—in experiences and arrangements available to the senses of our hearers. We shall try to reach behind, above, below, through, in, with, and under traditional words, reach into the past and present of great traditional words with exegetical, literary, and lexicographical tools, reach under the cultural layers which often obscure the extensive “meanings” and shades of meaning undulating within every powerful word of our theological vocabulary. The grid below offers a brief methodology for such word study. Once a preacher has isolated the key word or words (hopefully no more than two) in his sermons, usually in the means or goal accent of the outline, he might run the word through the assembly line found below. Try it with a word like “salvation.”

*Original*

Study of meaning, setting, and context of the word in the Greek or Hebrew text.

*Mother Tongue*

Study of the developed meaning(s) of the word in the history of the English language. The exhaustive *Oxford Dictionary* or Skeat's *Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* will be helpful for this exercise.

*Present Environments*

How, if at all, is the word “used” in these settings:  
 Professional-theological grouping;  
 Congregation;  
 Among close friends;  
 On the street  
 (think of your barber shop);  
 In contemporary rock, blues, folk or country music (here lies the key to the so-called younger generation);  
**IN YOUR OWN MIND**  
 (here is where *you* discover whether you mean what you say when you preach)?

This dogged pursuit of the purposive, dynamic, and utilitarian bases and functions of certain words, especially those which are merely transcendent or almost out of sight in our culture, must have high priority on the agenda of the contemporary preacher or teacher within the church. We must find ways through study of the mother tongue as well as the original to make ancient words incarnate among common people (beginning with ourselves), to strip bare the ancient symbols in order to understand the needs both of the ancient common people who brought the words into use and the modern common people who are losing their ability to use them. The task requires not only an exploration of original form, style, and settings, but also of the form, style, growth, and settings of words in the mother tongue. The study of Greek and Hebrew (especially since most of us preachers quickly lose track of the original) without a complementary study of the vernacular, or mother tongue, tends to confuse the preacher. When the preacher is unable to fuse the original with the vernacular, he often finds himself lost in McLuhan's modern global village—a mute ancestral spirit, silly as Laugh-In's Henry Gibson, the consummate clerical anachronism.

I heartily endorse Richard Caemmerer's imperative in a recent address: Don't preach what you don't mean! I endorse, though with fear and trembling, his brave commands to put our faith in words to each other on the spot in worship settings nose to nose, and to speak the Lord's Prayer eyeball to eyeball. These are the kinds of chances in communication we must take again and again to discover

whether we're merely full of sound and fury in the church or whether we are shaped by faith in a real Word.

People in the arts, especially in theater and in certain kinds of folk and rock music, apparently more serious about communication than we, have shown greater daring than we in producing, creating, experiencing as by rapture actual relationships between themselves and their audiences, and have tried to revive through *experience* the function of words and the community around words so threatened in a technological society. The artists, and many "full-fledged" hippies understand the fears, the longings, and above all the dangers of our time: wordlessness which may lead to deadly loneliness, which may lead to psychic and social chaos. They reach for new experiences of community with words even when they parody the difficulty we all have with our cherished words and word symbols. Perhaps some Christians fear less for the future of words because they have a hope which most contemporary artists and hippies do not have. Christopher Dawson summarizes that hope in *The Formation of Christendom*:

The history of Christianity is the history of a divine intervention in history and we cannot study it apart from the history of man's culture in the widest sense of the word. For the word of God was first revealed to the people of Israel and became embodied in a society. Secondly, the word of God became Incarnate in a particular person at a particular moment in history, and thirdly, this process of human redemption was carried on in the life of the church which was the new Israel—the universal community which was the bearer and the communicator of divine revelation and the organ by which



man participated in the new life of the Incarnate Word. Thus Christianity has entered into the stream of human history and the process of human culture. It has become culturally creative, for it has changed human life and there is nothing in human thought and action which has not been subjected to its influence, while at the same time it has suffered from the limitations and vicissitudes that are inseparable from temporal existence.<sup>12</sup>

That Dawson can make this quiet assertion when Christianity is in its gravest hour offers me considerable support and confidence. Neither the gates of hell nor the new global village replete with all the potential terrors and delights of a new cultism and occultism, the age of Aquarius, communes Stoic and Epicurean, Apollonian and Dionysiac, trips into chemical dimensions of being and nonbeing, society polarized over its most precious verbal symbols, undulating to the rhythms of "all-at-once" TV, rock, advertisements, who-knows-what-next in the awesome realm of the electron, shall prevail against the church. God is incarnate in the church and through His church in the stream

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<sup>12</sup> Christopher Dawson, *The Formation of Christendom* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967), p. 17.

(if that word is yet usable) of the history which He brought into being by His Word.

Our immediate task, perhaps the task of our lives, is to overcome — among a people who still have ears to hear and eyes to see words — the illusion that history or nature or culture or mass media has sucked God up as in a vacuum cleaner. If His church should allow that to happen in the minds of people, God should have either to bring matters to a close or to pop up incarnate in some medium other than word — a rock group perhaps.

But here I give up for, to use Caemmerer's words, I no longer know nor mean nor want to know nor mean what I say. At this point in my "theological development" I by no means see the battle of the Word or of words lost. For us who make words a vocation in the church the 20th century may be round one in what God through all His senses knows will be a long and lively battle against all who would choose to become non-word inchoate, against all those who would choose the realm of hateful non-relationship, the darkness in which there are no words, merely *sounds* of weeping and gnashing of teeth.  
St. Louis, Mo.