Evangelising through New Media // Fr Richard Healey

- Christianity is a communication event
- We presume that the METHODS change but the MESSAGE stays the same.
- No! We learn from Marshall McLuhan that 'the medium is the message.'

McLuhan (1911-1980) was a Canadian educator, philosopher and scholar. Also coined the phrase: 'the Global village'. He predicted the World Wide Web 30 years before it was invented. Born in a nominally protestant family, he grew up as an agnostic, until in his mid 20s he began to read GK Chesterton, which led to his conversion to Catholicism at the age of 26 (in May 1937). After that he mostly taught in Catholic universities, including the University of Saint Louis, but he also taught at Cambridge for some years. His insights were in the history of technology, and he sees that the key moments in that history were:

- Creation of a true alphabet with letters for both vowels and consonants
  (Greek ~800BC)
  - o Linear, sequential, uniform and repeatable elements
- Movable type > printing press of Johannes Gutenberg (1439) – reused wine press
  - o Accelerated, intensified and enabled both cultural and cognitive changes
  - o The printing press ushered in the cultural predominance of the VISUAL > aural/oral
- The printing press did something that handwritten manuscripts could never achieve: the widespread predominance of written communication.
  - o The power of the alphabet was now transformed and enhanced:
    Linear, sequential, uniform elements now effectively became (infinitely) repeatable
  - o By 1500, the printing press had spread to dozens of cities across Europe and more than 20,000,000 books had been printed...)
  - o By 1600, some 200,000,000 books had been printed.
- This began to impact upon the world in sometimes unexpected ways:
  - o Concept of "Linear, sequential, uniform and repeatable elements" began to be applied to other spheres – like production and development of production line.
  - o Also applied to Churches – for the first time to seating structure > Pews introduced
- Huge impact upon the western world, impacting upon the way people relay information

Fast forward 500 years to the 20th century and the changes in communication technology that has ushered in a new era. First the radio began to restore a little of the aural/oral traditions (but within a heavily rational and abstract framework), then television and finally the internet began to restore the more visual experience of communication.

The power of image

Compare the use of words and images.

Words:	Images:
- Abstract - Sequential - Rational - Left Brain	- Concrete - Holistic - Intuitive - Right Brain

eg – 'The boy is sad.'

Early websites (mid-late 1990s) were usually only extensions of the printed page – a slab of words on the screen (usually accompanied by terrible background images, midi files and poor fonts!)

- Do you remember the first time that you actually saw / used the internet? [Am I the only geek here who actually knows when and where that was – January 1996 in Melbourne; using the new Netscape browser, which had been released a few months earlier.]

- Christmas Day 1995, first version of the **vatican.va** website was published, with the Holy Father's Christmas message. I created my first website later in 1996 – for the Paris World Youth Day.
- Back in 1990, Pope John Paul II in the very positive message for World Communications Day, entitled 'the Christian Message in a Computer Culture' – seeing that for the Church technology is a 'further means for fulfilling her mission,' and called the Church to make use of the new resources 'for her ever pressing task of evangelisation.'
- In 2002, also for World Communications Day, JP2 issued a new document called 'Internet: a new forum for proclaiming the Gospel.' Noting that the Church approaches the new medium with 'realism and confidence.' "Like other communications media, it is a means, not an end in itself."
- The last five World Communications Day messages of Pope Benedict (2008-2012) have each touched upon the new media, and have contained sobering encouragements to engage in this new pastoral sphere: 'make astute use of the unique possibilities offered by modern communications.' (2010).
- The last few years has seen a move to a much more graphically rich web experience, with many more images, higher image resolutions, and greater use of video.
- Massive development in web technologies, spurred on in part by increasing speed of internet connections and greater availability of various broadband systems. [So called Web 2.0]

So how do we effectively engage in the use of new media, in the light of the history of communications? There are some basics that must be covered.

- Remember – the Internet (and social media) is primarily visual – appeal to the right brain!
  - Use lots of engaging images – but understand their power
  - Returning to an earlier church practice of teaching through images (stained glass windows usually told the story of the Gospels; the Protestants preferred St Paul)
  - Know how people use websites – the way they scan them, follow the best practices
  - Even so, ensure that your website is accessible for the visually impaired
- Even Twitter (and Texts) are visual – helps explain all those smiley faces & leets.
- Use language that engages, rather than alienates. (eg Inglese, Francese, Tedesco; no, it should be English, française, Deutsch; the same with 'churchy' language)
- Understand the phenomena of CPA - Continuous Partial Attention
- Recognise the shallow thinking that dominates – but invite to go deeper
- Integrate social media into your online world so that it doesn't necessarily mean more work.
- Be creative in your workflow; find ways that content creators can disperse information through every channel that you want them to (eg email, Twitter/Facebook, website, newsletter)
- Allow websites and social media to complement and engage with the church community; they never truly work as a substitute for intentional communities.
- Lead by example: once the basics are in place, ensure that real community remains the priority.
  - Tool to evaluate your website…

Suggested Resources:

- Daniel Arasa, Lorezo Cantoni & Lucio Ruiz, *Religious Internet Communication: Facts, trends and experiences in the Catholic Church* [2010] Pontifical University of the Holy Cross - EDUSC
- David Kinnaman, *unChristian: What a new generation really thinks about Christianity… and why it matters* [2007]
- Jesse Rice, *The Church of Facebook How the Hyperconnected Are Redefining Community* [2009]
- Shane Hipps, *Flickering Pixels: How Technology shapes your faith* [2009]
- Tim Challies, *The Next Story: Life and Faith after the Digital Explosion* [2011]
- Watch Sherry Turkle, 'Connected, but alone?' on TED.com
- My websites: **frrick.org** and **blog.frrick.org; dow.org.au**