

SHARING MEDIA EXPERIENCES – ANGLOSAXON-STYLE

by Seàn-Patrick Lovett

Farewell Mass Media. Welcome Social Media.

“An Introduction to Mass Media”. That was the name of the communications course I used to teach at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome several years ago.

No such course exists today. Firstly, because Media no longer needs any “Introduction”. And, secondly, because Social took the place of “Mass” in Media ages ago.

Back then, when I asked my students to list – in order of importance – the media they relied upon most, the response I received was this: Print. Radio. Television...sometimes Cinema (depending on where they came from).

And then the Internet happened. And the order started going in the opposite direction. Internet. Television. Radio. Print...hardly ever Cinema.

Even Vatican Radio, that used to describe itself as “a broadcast radio that is also on the internet”, quickly became “a radio on the internet that also broadcasts”.

Finally, the Gregorian University shut down the Communications Department altogether. After all, said the Media Gurus, “no one reads anymore, no one watches television or listens to the radio anymore – so why bother? Now, thanks to the speed and efficiency of Social Media, we know everything we need to know about communications and communicating”.

In Google We Trust. On Samsung We Swear. Our Faith-book is Facebook. Our Well of Wisdom is Wikipedia. And our smartphones are smarter than we are.

Old-fashioned analogue versus new-fangled digital.

So who needs Catholic Media – audio, video or the printed word?

Actually I know a lot of people who need it. All of it: sound, images...and words on a page.

It probably has something to do with my age (don't ask because I won't tell), and with the fact that mine is the only generation in the history of the world to straddle both the analogue and the digital ages. If you love horse-riding as much as I do, you'll understand what that feels like: it's like having a foot in both stirrups.

In this sense we are totally unique. Our parents knew only an analogue era when, if something broke, you fixed it. The same was as true for mechanical objects as it was for interpersonal relationships: when something didn't work (whether it was a motor car or a marriage), you took time to identify the problem – and it took patience as you tried to find and apply a solution. Our children (and my students) know only a digital age, a rapid-fire numerical system that responds to breakage by throwing the old one away and acquiring a new one. And again, the same attitude applies to relationships as well.

Marketing experts are particularly good at summarizing these trends in their advertising campaigns. The Samsung Galaxy campaign of a few years back was one of the most successful ever for a mobile phone. The slogan was four words only: “The Future is Now!”

Last year, Samsung launched their latest Galaxy supermodel. They also updated their marketing slogan. This time it was reduced to three words only: “Next is Now!”

The implication is clear: there is no more Future...just whatever comes next.

Remember what we used to call “writer’s cramp”? Today, my 20 year-old students tell me they suffer from, what they call, “swiper’s cramp” – the result of constantly flicking the wrist over a hand-held device to see what comes next...and next...and next...and next.

The only questions they seem to care about asking are: Who, What, When and Where? Few of them have the time, or the interest, in asking Why?

After all, Facts are now an option. And Truth is just an opinion.

Never in the history of humanity have we known so much...and understood so little. Never has there been such a need to respond to the *only* question worth asking: Why? And with over two thousand years of history and experience, who – if not the Church – is better qualified to offer the answers that Google can never give?

The Catholic Brand: 2,017 years and still going strong.

Please don’t be scandalized if I tell you that, now and then, prestigious schools of business (mostly from the United States) ask me to give them a lecture on, what they call, “The Catholic Church’s Business Model” – or as one very famous American University put it: “The secret of your success in branding God”.

Of course, they don’t call us “The Catholic Church”. For these business schools, we are “a global, multinational corporation that enjoys distinctive stakeholder fidelity”. They are intrigued that we are still around after 2,000 years...not to mention how we’ve survived every possible scandal known to humanity: financial, sexual, you name it – we’ve done it.

Besides the fact that, sometime around the 14th century, we had three “CEO’s” trying to run the organization – two in France and one in Rome.

The important thing is that these successful business schools recognize us as a model to be studied. They admire our international outreach, our interconnectivity, our creativity, our ability to focus on our core messages and, most important of all, our adaptability to different cultures...what they call “target markets”. Of course.

It has taken us a while, but we are slowly getting over the idea that “one-size-fits-all”. The world is a vast and complex place and we are complicated creatures who thrive on variety and the ability to exercise choice. The human race is also naturally pragmatic and tends to make the best use of whatever is available.

Let me give you a few examples based exclusively on what I have seen and experienced first-hand on my travels. In other words, you will *not* find this information on Google!

Around the world in 80 seconds.

If Radio is alive and well and thriving in **Papua New Guinea**, for example, it's because Radio is still the most effective way to reach a population spread out across outlying islands and inland jungles where electricity (let alone the internet) is still going to be a long time coming. Radio is also the quickest and easiest way to tell people living on the coast to get away from the beach because there's a tsunami coming – or those living on, or near, one of its 60 volcanoes to get down from the mountain because it's about to explode.

When I was in Papua giving a communications workshop in Rabaul two years ago, a local Bishop told me how he used to record Vatican Radio English-language programs and hand-carry the recordings on his motor-boat to the islands of his diocese where the programs would be translated into some of Papua New Guinea's 850 different languages.

Often Radio remains the first, and only, choice – because people have no other options. Like the teenagers I met at Rhino Refugee Camp in the province of Arua, **Uganda**. The province borders the Democratic Republic of Congo to the west and Sudan to the north and hosts one of the largest concentrations of refugees in that part of Africa. The people living there have suffered so badly and for so long that the local *Logbara* language has no word for “hope”. The closest equivalent is to say: “I put my heart on something that may happen in the future”.

Which is why they listen to the radio. The young refugees I spoke to are Muslims, Christians, Animists...and they all gather around the one plastic wind-up radio in the camp, its aerial strung up in a thorn tree, to know what's happening and whether or not they still have a future. Listening to the radio also helps them to learn English. They especially like listening to Vatican Radio's report on the Pope's Angelus every Sunday. Because whenever the Pope talks about refugees, they say, he makes them feel (in their words) “less invisible”.

Things are very different further south in **Zambia**. When I was teaching at St Dominic's Major Seminary in the capital, Lusaka, I asked my 70 young seminarians how many of them owned a smartphone. I was trying to make a point about how we can't live without mobile phones anymore - and so I was most embarrassed when no one replied. Just as I was cursing myself for being so culturally insensitive, the class spokesman put up his hand and asked: “Excuse me, Professor, do you mean one smartphone...or two?”.

And on the subject of smartphones, I wonder if you would be as surprised as I was to discover that the 4th fastest-growing market in the world for the sale of hand-held devices – is **Myanmar**. When you think about it, though, it makes perfect sense: here is a country that was cut off from the rest of the world, living under an iron-fisted military dictatorship, for half a century.

Until two years ago, a SIM card cost you around \$2,000 – an impossible sum of money for anyone who wasn't part of the ruling oligarchy. When I was in Yangon last year, I bought one for \$1 which included free local calls throughout the country for a week.

And if you like statistics, you may be interested to know that in **Vietnam** there are more mobile phones than people: roughly one and half per person. I met several families there that prefer to save money on essentials like food and clothing so long as it allows them to purchase a smartphone.

Like several other countries in Asia, Myanmar and Vietnam never experienced the desktop or lap-top computer phase that we did: they went straight from ink and paper - to iPhones and iPads. Which is why it should come as no surprise to know that, throughout Asia, social media is the most popular and ubiquitous means of communicating...just about anything – from pop songs to politics to popes.

By far the greatest number of visitors to our own Vatican Radio Facebook page are in the **Philippines**. Whenever I want to boost engagement, all I have to do is post an article critical of President Duterte and within moments the page is on fire. Understandably, the **United States** is next in line in terms of the number of followers – many of whom get very excited whenever anyone mentions the Latin Mass – which is why I seem to spend more and more of my time editing comments.

Yet while we continue to study ways to boost our reach on Facebook – and are justifiably excited about Pope Francis' over 40 million followers on Twitter and the growing numbers on Instagram – it does us good, now and then, to pause and remember that still less than half of the world's population has access to the internet. In many of the places I visit in Africa and Asia, the first priority is getting access to clean drinking water, or coping with disease and malnutrition, or providing text books in schools. Sometimes it's about building the schools in the first place.

Some anglosaxon-style conclusions.

Which is why I believe that what we now call “traditional media” (print, radio, television...) will continue to be with us for a long, long time. I believe this traditional media will continue to merge naturally with new media technologies as they develop – and according to the cultures, needs and creativity of those who use them.

Today's (and tomorrow's) media consumers are omnivorous: according to their passions and curiosity, they easily meander from one medium to another. That is why I also believe that, regardless of the media platform, users will continue to be driven by the quality of the content we offer – rather than either the quantity or the velocity. Content really is King.

And when it comes to content providing, no one does it better than we do. No one has better stories to tell. No one tells them better. After all, we've been doing it in every way possible – using art, architecture, music and the printed word – for over 2,000 years.

As they swipe through Snapchat, my millennial students confess that they still prefer books they can “hold” and “possess”. (E-books are down nearly 30% since their peak in 2013.) And again, it's the under 30 year-olds who confirm that, not only do they love listening to the radio, but podcasts, they say, have never been so popular.

But, just to prove the point that we really are the Masters of marketing, at Vatican Radio we call podcasts “God-casts”. Of course. After all, He is the reason why we do what we do.