

THE IMPACT OF THE MASS MEDIA ON THE SPIRITUALITY OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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Introduction

As we reflect on the theme “signs of the times”, there are, perhaps, a lot of things that come to mind. One of the most obvious signs of our times is media technology. My own reflections in this paper will focus specifically on the impact of the mass media on the spirituality of young people in Papua New Guinea. Throughout this paper, I will highlight both positive and negative influences of the mass media on youth, and conclude with some proposals on how education – religious education, and other related disciplines – can help address the problems we are facing in our society. Furthermore, it is my firm conviction that this must be a collective effort, and a responsibility of the government, the churches, and the communities throughout the nation, to build a better, healthier, and more-peaceful society.

The mass media, especially film and television, enable rapid communication for people throughout Papua New Guinea. The media offer great possibilities for expanding knowledge, understanding, ideas, and information, for the development of society, as well as for entertainment. But, while they can help spiritual development, especially through up-to-date information, they can create problems for the spirituality of young people. This is the issue being explored here.

The Impact of the Communication Media on Young People

Mass communication media in Papua New Guinea are a concern for leaders, as well as educators, because of the influence they have on individuals and society as a whole. The media can be a powerful instrument in bringing ideas, experiences, and even cultures, into people's lives, with which they may, otherwise, not have contact. The mass media can, therefore, be an influential agent of change, especially on youth.

One example of this change is the way the media inform young people of the changing fashions in Western cultures. For example, the media bring to young people of Papua New Guinea the latest fashions in clothes, shoes, caps, music, hair styles, and the type of language that is circulating among the youth in countries, such as, the United States of America and Australia. Young people are informed about the latest developments in youth culture around the world. Like all agents of change, the mass media have both positive and negative influences.

Positive Influences

Through the media, Papua New Guinea has become part of the global village. Some of the positive values presented by the media are:

- General education;
- Agriculture;
- Health education;
- Entertainment;
- Developing political awareness; and
- Raising public awareness of social issues.

Some of the positive effects of media programmes in Papua New Guinea are the avenues they open. They make available for Papua New Guineans a whole new world, with which they have no direct contact. The media have expanded their knowledge of other countries, and other parts of their own country. Through the media, new information and ideas are received, and are available about people and events globally. The other prominent role

for the media, especially television, is entertainment. As in Western countries, television provides relatively unlimited home entertainment.

The media play a role in the establishment and maintenance of national unity in Papua New Guinea. Through the media, different tribes/clans, who were once enemies have better knowledge and understanding of each other. Gemo considers that the greatest weapon against prejudice and distrust is information.¹ He believes that the media are needed for a democratic system of government. In addition, the ordinary people need to be informed about what is happening in the government, so that there is more opportunity for shared decision-making, and criticism of government policies, to ensure a better government for the nation. The problem is that ordinary people do not always have access to the media. When they do, they are probably not informed enough to be interested because of the biases that come through the different programmes.

Negative Influences

Some of the negative influences of the mass media in Papua New Guinea appear to be:

- Instead of promoting the flow of communication throughout the nation, the mass media actually limit it. The media are predominantly in English. Therefore, a relatively small percentage of the population is reached. Also, the print media cannot be used by the illiterate in the community. Electronic media – radio, television, audio, and video cassettes – are dependent on a supply of electricity, and the use of costly equipment. Broadcast media are limited in range, and television is virtually restricted to main towns and cities.
- The mass media is a one-way means of communication. Opportunities are there to get messages broadcast on radio or television, or to write letters to the editors of newspapers, but this becomes costly for ordinary, rural people. It is not likely

¹ O. Gemo, "The Impact of Communication Media", in *Catalyst* 21-2 (1991), p. 191.

that many people could use this channel of feedback effectively.

- There is difficulty in gathering information from around the country. Perhaps some of the contributing factors to this are: the distances, the remoteness of certain areas of the country, lack of money and education. As a result, certain areas are better represented in the media, while, for others, the mass media seems almost non-existent.
- Influential people, such as, politicians are heard and read about frequently in the media, while the ordinary people tend to listen. As yet, they do not seem to have much opportunity to be heard beyond their own immediate family and local community contexts.
- The impact of Western values by the media brings about a different set of values, which society cannot authenticate.
- Another negative effect of mass media is their contribution to the widening of gaps between people in the country – the rich and poor, educated and uneducated, urban and rural, young and old. Those who have access to the media are better off than those without it. This can aggravate social divisions in the country, and become a cause of friction.

The Media and the Transmission of Values

Most of the media entertainment available in Papua New Guinea is foreign, both in origin and content. Generally, a foreign culture is presented uncritically, with all its assumptions and values. This may be presented in a powerful film or programme on the television. Messages picked up subconsciously from such programmes could vary, according to the population who watch the programme.

For example, programmes such as *Home and Away*, *The Bold and the Beautiful*, *The Young and the Restless*, *Days of our Lives*, and *Melrose Place* could have different effects on the old and the young. From such

programmes, images of life and moral messages can be absorbed in an uncritical way. For example, messages like: it is acceptable to be dishonest, if it gets you what you want; one of the best ways to succeed in life is to be violent; the most important thing in life is to enjoy yourself; sex before marriage is normal; faithfulness to a marriage partner does not really matter; people who are different are stupid. Many of the messages are alien to the traditional values of Melanesian culture, and of Christianity. Moreover, in a time of rapid change, when there is uncertainty and ambiguity about values and beliefs, and about moral authority in the church and community, then people are more prone to absorbing presumed values in television entertainment in a relatively uncritical way. Because viewers can be easily enthralled with a good story, they are relatively incapable of standing back and developing a critical analysis of the meanings and values embedded in the stories. Therefore, the more people become passive viewers of television programmes, the quicker and easier foreign values and assumptions can become assimilated. As the underlying values change so do the culture, and people's behaviour. It seems that traditional Melanesian values, like responsibility and the traditional moral code, are being quickly eroded. They are being replaced by values from television's view of the world.

The media, especially television, could also help create a growing moral insensitivity in people, through continuous exposure to scenes of brutality or immorality – especially when this comes across as integral parts of stories presented as entertainment. It could help make people more indifferent to the suffering and needs of others.

The Media and the Creation of Wants

The functioning of the mass media is dependent on the advertising industry. Advertising can serve a useful purpose in the following ways:

- providing information about products on the market;
- letting people know about products that may be useful;

- giving people a choice between different products; and
- helping promote businesses.

However, advertising also creates problems, by creating wants in people. Advertisers do this by playing on people's basic needs, such as the need for love, security, happiness, etc. By suggesting ways, in which these needs can be satisfied, advertising creates a desire for things that are not needed. For example, drinking alcohol is proposed as a way of temporarily forgetting worries and problems; a flashy car can be a way to gain prestige; money is proposed as a key to freedom; down to the more mundane, that "coke" is needed to enjoy life.

Advertising can deliberately set out to manipulate people, and create new wants in them. So, when these new wants undermine good values, and Christian principles, they can be damaging to people, and their traditional culture.

In an extreme form, the creation of new wants by the media, through advertising, can be socially devastating. It can help create a big gap between expectations and reality. For example, people may become prepared to kill in order to get what they want; this is now not just an isolated occurrence in PNG. Similarly, uncritical consumption of consumerist values from the media can contribute to growing greed and corruption; people can be motivated to take drastic steps to acquire what goods they think they need to enjoy life. In one sense, consumer-oriented advertising is a form of materialist propaganda that needs to be called into question.

In turn, if the above mechanisms for media influence are actually occurring, then it appears that advertising in the mass media could be a contributing factor to the increasing crime-rate in the towns and cities. Traditionally, there were no "haves" and "have-nots" in society. Everyone was cared for, and had what they needed. There was not so much competition between people, and most people were on the same social and material plane; their goods and property needs were simple and realistic, and, in the main, these needs were satisfied. However, media advertising is probably influential,

because it is powerful and attractive in its presentation. It tends to target feelings and basic instincts, to get a response.

Changing Social Behaviour as a Result of Media Influence

Studies in the Pacific² have shown marked changes in the way of life, and interaction, between people after the introduction of television or videos. Similar changes have been noted in other cultures. Before the introduction of television, people spent much of their leisure time in talking, telling stories, visiting friends, singing, dancing, and doing craft-work. People had and made time for each other. After the introduction of television, many of these activities have been drastically reduced. Since Melanesian culture arises out of people's interaction with each other, then the culture is likely to change, if the interaction is severely reduced or changed. Some of the things, which are prized in Melanesian culture, are on the verge of extinction. The oral traditions of the culture may no longer be passed on, as story-telling is being replaced by TV-watching.

Education and the Impact of the Media

Media education needs to help students become familiar with the function of the media in society, and to develop critical skills in analysing and evaluating the influence of the media on the community.

Providing information about the media can be the best weapon to equip young people, and old, for that matter, for combating problems that arise from the influence of mass media – particularly the erosion of traditional culture. The giving of critical information need not necessarily be limited to schools. Other organisations, like the churches, the government, and social welfare groups, can also assist in the task of informing and educating people about the advantages and disadvantages of the media, and of how to appraise its often subconscious influence. It is important that, in education, both the positive and negative aspects are treated objectively.

Schools should provide media education for their youth, through the curriculum. Media questions should not be restricted just to the religious education curriculum, but they could also be built into other subject areas,

² Gemo, "The Impact of Communication Media", pp. 191-198.

such as science, social science, personal development and guidance. Media education should help provide youth with knowledge and skills, to be critical viewers of what is presented in the media. Part of this education includes the knowledge of how the media function. This may mean, in practical terms, visiting the radio station, printing press, or television station, near the school. It may mean even seeing, or being part of, the production and distribution of movies and videos. To be a critical and active viewer and reader of the media, means that a person calls into question what is presented. Examples of such questions would be: what message is this particular programme giving? Who is this programme targeting? What do I think about it? Is this in line with my set of values regarding life? Etc.

Analysis and Evaluation of the Values Promoted in the Media: Development of Critical Skills³

The development of critical skills includes:

- analysing content;
- distinguishing fact from fiction;
- becoming aware of the values, both promoted, or implied, by particular programmes, presentations, and advertisements, noting the play on emotions; and
- raising critical consciousness of the content of song lyrics, creation of atmosphere, and the images and models of success and happiness that are proposed or implied.

Consideration must be given to the positive values and problems created where types of music (“rock” and “folk”) tend to create a distinct youth sub-culture. For example, global awareness of human need, through “Band Aid”; potential for the exploitation of youth.

The development of such critical skills will hopefully assist in evaluating the influence of the media on the people and the community. There needs

³ Cf. Unda Oceania, *Mass Media Education for Youth in the South Pacific*, Suva Fiji: Unda Oceania, 1983.

to be a collective responsibility in monitoring the quality of media programmes. It is not the sole role of a censorship board, but the community and the individual also share in that role in monitoring the influence of the media. This shared responsibility would be possible through good media education.

Teachers need a practical awareness of the influences that surround the world of youth. They need to be a step ahead of their students, if they are to be of help to them. As regards the media, one task is to watch the television shows that young people watch, listen to their music, and be in touch with their world. The school needs to give special attention to the challenges that young people are facing, and help them, assisting them to become critical media viewers and listeners. The school is incapable of solving all their problems. However, the school should be able to guide them, so that they learn something about how to deal with the problems they face, now, and later on, in life, by applying the principles and practices that are hopefully demonstrated in religious education, and other related disciplines.

Conclusion

In summary, the impact of the media has the potential to benefit people, and, at the same time, poses dangers, in terms of widening gaps between people, loss of important values, and destruction of culture. To combat the negative effects of the media, the most important weapon is education – media-awareness education. This means learning about what the media do, and how they develop their presentations; and learning to be critical of the media, while, at the same time, being aware of their own values.

Making people aware, and giving them the tools to critically assess the dangers of the media, and helping them to make the most of what is good in the media, is a long-term project. The churches can help in this by initiating media-education programmes. Initially, this can be done through normal pastoral work, and the teaching and preaching of the churches. It can also be done through articles and items submitted to the media.

In the longer term, the churches can pressure the government and the education authorities to introduce media awareness education in the school

curricula. When working with youth, the churches can include media education in their programmes. Dangers cannot be removed. The dangers are more pervasive than censorship can deal with. What could be done is to try to equip people, through education, to deal intelligently with the media.

The proposal here is that people be helped, through religious education and other related disciplines or subjects, to become critical viewers of the media. They need to be aware of the positive and negative effects of the media, so that they can be critical of what they listen to and watch. Being critical of the values the media present means awareness of one's own personal values, acceptance of what is good from foreign cultures, and holding on to what is good from the local culture. This is not an easy task, in a time of rapid change.

The people of Papua New Guinea, especially youth, need to be more critical of the media, and what the media present. Young people need to challenge the systems responsible for media programs, so the government, and the community, can become more aware of their needs.

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