

Switched on to the media

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My son is 14. He lives on a different planet to me. He certainly lives on a different planet to the one I lived on when I was 14. He lives in an entirely digital world, where his life is played out through - in this order - online computer games, the internet, his mobile phone, radio and television. Some times I feel like he is snowboarding down a mountain in the path of a digital avalanche. And I can't even ski.

We are entering an era of digital saturation, where our shopping, banking, education, leisure, entertainment, communication and, for some of us, even our worship are done online. And we people of faith have to decide what we are going to do about it. We are in a similar place to pioneer Christians who first dipped their toes in the media water 80 years ago. We have to work out, almost from scratch, how Christians should engage with the radically new media landscape.

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Of course, one option is not to engage at all. We could stand like King Canute on the digital beach and pray that the tide will turn. But it won't.

People of faith have no mandate to stand still and simply watch as the culture is transformed around them. The vision of the Evangelical Alliance's Forum for Change initiative is to see Christians engaging with the media in new and constructive ways. We want to

serve the media community and to see it transformed by God.

The digital challenge

As you probably know, 2012 will be a significant date in broadcasting history. Over the next five years, the analogue TV signals that we've been using over the last 60 years will be switched off. This presents us with a challenge: if the nation is going to go digital by 2012 (at least as far as its TV viewing goes), can the Christian community match this timetable? Can we equip ourselves with the technology and the know-how to take advantage of the opportunities in front of us? Can we change our thinking to accommodate the new digital environment?

It's not just a matter of buying a video projector for the church or sending the weekly notice-sheet round by email. The digital revolution asks us to change our way of thinking. It asks profound theological and pastoral questions, as well as questions about communications, technology and creativity.

Of course it's important that Christian leaders are up to speed with digital developments and their pastoral and mission implications. But if you ask me, honestly, I would say that the future of the Christian message in the digital environment can't be left in the hands of church leaders. If we want to engage in the new digital environment we will need to take a lead from the young people in our churches.

It is people in their teens and 20s who are most comfortable in this Brave New World. But they need those of us who are older to understand and engage with them both technologically and pastorally. They need sustained help to work out

what it means to live as Christians in a digital, virtual world.

Meet the media

For too long the relationship between the Church and the secular media has been characterised by an uneasy stand-off. The media, mainly rooted in secular humanism, largely fail to understand the Christian Church. The only thing the Church seems to speak up about is the scheduling of Songs of Praise or the misrepresentation of Christians in films or TV shows. Within the media, Christians are renowned for complaining, usually about content that is sexually explicit or blasphemous.

At the same time, while we were campaigning and lobbying about our loss of a special place in the TV schedules, we have often missed the bigger point that the public imagination is being filled with the lowest common denominator of violence, sensation and D-list celebrity. In recent months the media industry has struggled with its own lack of moral compass in scandals involving phone-ins and competitions.

What is our response to this? Historically the default mode for Christians seems to have been to avoid talking to the media whenever possible and, if you can't avoid it, say as little as possible. That approach simply won't do any more.

We need a far more constructive, engaged approach to the relationship between the Church and the media. Jesus challenges us to raise our light on a stand so that people may see - to provide a Christian voice in the public conversation.

Patsy McKie is a great example. Patsy founded Mothers Against Violence after her son Dorrie was shot and killed in Manchester in 1999. Since then she has found herself constantly engaging with local and national media, especially on issues of gun-crime and forgiveness.

"Local radio, TV and newspapers give us the opportunity to speak about the hope we have for the community," McKie says. "Also, we exercise our prophetic responsibility in this way. It's our way of raising up the cross in public as a sign of hope and reconciliation."

Authentic voices

We live in a culture that values authentic voices and stories, and the Christian community is rich in such stories. One of the ways they can be heard is through the local media. McKie's is one of many voices that feature in the local media, communicating a Christian worldview, offering an alternative reality embodied in God's people and exercising our advocacy. She is one of over 80 Christians around Manchester who have received basic media training through the Evangelical Alliance's local network. They have committed themselves to be "always prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks after the hope that we have".

Forum for Change is encouraging many such "media hubs" to emerge in towns and cities across the UK. It's one way of re-engaging the Christian community with the mainstream media, enabling us to tell the story in our culture.

The digital future presents the Christian Church with huge opportunities. Imagine how much Saint Paul would have loved to live in the age of email, podcasting and virtual communities.

We need to take down the wall of privilege and throw off our reticence to engage with mainstream media. We cannot afford to be an analogue church in a digital age. That's why it is so good that in recent months we have seen an increasing openness at high levels in the industry to dialogue with the Church, partly through the work of the Churches' Media Council.

Every day I meet with programme-makers and industry executives, and most of them are as scared and uncertain about the future as anyone else. They need to hear clear voices from people of faith who understand the digital environment, and who can remind them of the sacred humanity of the audience and that there is more to communication than commerce. We need to speak about values and spirituality, and not from a distance in green ink, but out of real and close relationships.

To play that role we will need to build bridges, not barriers. Members of the media may see the Christian community as critical, ignorant, anti-intellectual and self-righteous. We need to become famous for being constructive, appreciative, co-operative and ready to serve.

We also need to support and encourage talented people in the industry. Many Christians who work in the media feel isolated, conflicted, sometimes compromised. So this year, *the Media Net* is being launched to support Christians working in the field. We're aiming to develop a widespread, robust chaplaincy service, easy ways of accessing support and friendship, resources dealing with issues facing Christians in the media, and a web-based community of support, information and friendship.

Come 2012 your old analogue TV set will stop working. If you want, you can still keep it sitting in the corner of your living room. You can even sit and watch it every night. But it will no longer receive TV programmes. It will be a museum-piece, a useless anachronism. If we don't come to terms with the media, the Christian Church may be as useless as an analogue TV in a digital age. We have four years to make the switch.