Media Literacy

It is our responsibility to be mindful of media because, like any form of communication, media tend to promote certain values—some that support the Christian life of discipleship and others that do not. Mass media are at the heart of our culture, the primary means by which people communicate and interpret what matters. Media literacy education has become more common in the United States in the last few decades. Media mindfulness adds Gospel values to the media literacy approach, discerning God's presence in media and discovering what this reflection process means for us as disciples.

The word *media* is plural; each of its forms is a "medium." In English-speaking countries, the mass outlets for information and news are usually referred to collectively as "the media." The term *media* can thus be misleading. In reality it embraces all technological forms of communication that "mediate" a message. There are many genres within each medium as well. Media mindfulness can be employed to focus on any medium and its productions.

To build the foundation for a good understanding of media mindfulness, we begin with communication, the process by which values are shared.

Communication

Communication creates relationships between people. Through these relationships, we share our values with one another. The verb *to communicate* comes from the Latin *communicare,* meaning "to participate, share, or hold in common." To communicate means to impart information or tell a story, and it can take several forms.

1. **Intrapersonal communication,** or "inner speech," is self-communication: a dialogue or conversation people have with themselves, especially when they need to make a decision.

2. **Interpersonal communication** is characterized by a mutual exchange of information or stories, usually between two people, either face-to-face or by telephone, instant message, text, e-mail, and so forth.

3. **Group communication** usually involves people gathered for a specific purpose with specific goals in mind—perhaps to make a decision, carry out a task, resolve a situation, study a topic, celebrate, or pray.

4. **Organizational communication** is an absolute necessity for an association such as a business, government, nonprofit organization, or parish to resolve conflicts and thrive. Information must flow continually from the top down, the bottom up, and across all departments or sections as well.

5. **Media,** or cultural and social communication, differ from the other forms. Note that the four forms above imply a back-and-forth dialogue. Media are delivery systems, and they generally deliver their content one-way. A single source, such as a television station or network, transmits to millions of sets at one time. The audience can receive the programming, but individuals cannot respond on equal footing. Mass media**,** mediated through technology, are often called "mass communications."

6. **Extrapersonal communication** refers to communication between machines—machines operated by individuals, groups, and organizations. Examples include e-mail, instant messages, and Web logs ("blogs" for short). Extrapersonal communication has the potential to empower every person on earth and give a voice to each one.

Values Inform Communication

Whenever we have a conversation, our values are implicitly present because we communicate about what is important to us. Values are those overarching ideals and ideas that guide our lives. In order to identify the values that media present to us, it is good to be aware of the values that we bring to any encounter with media.

One easy way to uncover our values is to ask, Where do I put my time and money? This media-based exercise will help reveal our values and make ourselves accountable for them.

Values are important ideals that give direction and inspiration to our lives. Authentic values are those of the Gospel that foster human dignity and the common good. They help us to build up the world around us. Self-centered values lead to negative attitudes and behaviors that are contrary to Gospel values and cause people to suffer both spiritually and materially.

Culture

Culture exists because people communicate their values to one another, forming complex webs of relationship.

Pope John Paul II set the standard for understanding culture when he said:

> Culture . . . is a specific dimension of the existence and being of man. It creates among the persons within each community a complex of bonds, determining the interpersonal and social character of human existence. Man is both subject and creator of culture in which he expresses himself and finds his equilibrium. (May 24, 1984, *Message of the Holy Father for the XVIII World Communications Day*, 2)

We grow up immersed in our national culture and also, perhaps, in a more regional subculture. We soak in the values, attitudes, and beliefs of those around us and of the people we encounter through media. No matter how much a Mexican couple in the United States might want to raise their child as a Mexican, it just cannot happen. Such children will be influenced by both their Mexican parents and the American culture in which they live. Without other external influences such as faith, this local-environment culture can become a person's entire worldview, greatly influencing one's thoughts and actions.

Popular Culture

Every country has many subcultures. For example, U.S. military families have a unique culture, because they move frequently around the country and the world through their service. A larger subculture is the popular culture—the shared, everyday experiences of ordinary people.

Though we cannot avoid the influence of this "pop culture," we can increase our awareness of its pervasive messages. Awareness enables us to identify which aspects of popular culture support Gospel values and which do not, which helps us to escape the lure of the negative aspects. As Christians our Baptisms call us not only to avoid but also to challenge values that do not promote human dignity.

What Is Media Literacy Education?

Media literacy education means teaching and learning about media, values, and the critical skills necessary for living in the twenty-first century. The media literate person is aware of the boundaries between reality and the constructed reality of the media and knows how to navigate them in meaningful ways.

Media literacy education has taken shape primarily in the last forty to fifty years. In 1964 John Culkin, SJ (1928–1993), wrote a curriculum on film study for his doctorate from Harvard; today he is known as the founder of the media literacy field in the United States. The Media Action Resource Center, formed by representatives from the national offices of Protestant denominations, developed the first comprehensive course about television in the United States in the late 1970s. This course, Television Awareness Training (TAT), has greatly influenced the media literacy movement.

The Center for Media Literacy (CML) was founded in 1977 with the publication of *Media & Values* magazine. Beginning in about 1990, the media literacy education movement in the United States began to grow. Several international conferences were held in Canada and the United States during the next decade. In 2001 the Alliance for a Media Literate America was founded, which includes an affinity group for faith communities.

People have become increasingly aware that they need skills to intentionally navigate the culture. Now all fifty states have standards that include media literacy topics, either as part of a standard subject such as English or social studies or as a stand-alone curriculum unit.

Two Lenses

We can use two lenses to look at the media culture—the lens of faith and the lens of mindfulness.

The belief that all of creation can reveal God to us is the first lens. Priest and geologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, SJ, illustrates this Catholic teaching when he says, "By virtue of the Creation and still more, of the Incarnation, *nothing* here below is *profane* for those who know how to see" (*The Divine Milieu*, 66). This perspective encourages believers to see the world as a place full of wonder and awe, and the media as a potential locus for discovering the presence of God in all manner of unlikely places. Using our eyes of faith on a daily basis keeps us rooted in the values of the Gospel, so that we may live the spiritual values of Jesus in everyday life and therein find meaning.

Mindfulness is the second lens, offering a reflective life strategy that questions and discerns. This lens allows us to study each medium in the context of its own structure and language. Using both of these lenses, believers can deepen their faith life in a mediated world in ways that are both faithful and relevant to twenty-first-century living.

The Church and Media

The Church teaches that media are gifts of God that can be used to promote humanity as well as to lead people away from God.

Pope John Paul II's last written document was about the mass media. He released *The Rapid Development* on January 24, 2005.

He wrote:

> The Church is not only called upon to use the mass media to spread the Gospel but, today more than ever, to integrate the message of salvation into the "new culture" that these powerful means of communication create and amplify. It tells us that the use of the techniques and the technologies of contemporary communications is an integral part of its mission in the third millennium.
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> Moved by this awareness, the Christian community has taken significant steps in the use of the means of communication for religious information, for evangelization and catechesis, for the formation of pastoral workers in this area, and *for the education to a mature responsibility of the users and the recipients of the various communications media*. (2, emphasis added)

The words in the last sentence of this excerpt articulate the heart of media mindfulness. It is our responsibility as pastoral leaders, teachers, and parents to help young people to navigate our media world and become media mindful teenagers and adults.

(This article is adapted from *Media Mindfulness: Educating Teens About Faith and Media,* by Gretchen Hailer, RSHM, and Rose Pacatte, FSP, and published by Saint Mary's Press, 2007. All rights reserved.)