Media Engagement beyond the Coronavirus

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Abstract

Transformational impact is increased through a holistic perspective for engaging with the media. Many more Christian influencers have engaged intentionally with media during the global coronavirus pandemic. Yet while Christians desire to influence through the media, they are also influenced by media messages. As Christians develop deeper *media awareness*, they interact more carefully with media messages and technologies of media. They can influence with integrity through their *media presence* in mainstream media. Christians can sensitively communicate contextualised biblical perspectives through *media ministries*. By using media to take people on explorative journeys of change, *media engagement* can play a holistic transformational role.

Key Words

equipping, influence, interaction, media engagement, relationship, transformation

Introduction

Engaging with media significantly shaped people's lives prior to COVID-19. During the coronavirus pandemic since early 2020, however, people have interacted differently with media than before. Interpersonal interactions have increasingly taken place through media channels. Media engagement focusses on relating critically to all media influences (Dahle 2014a). By learning to engage better with media, people should improve their interaction through media beyond the crisis. When Christian influencers engage with media intentionally, they can then enable transformational change in the lives of individuals and communities.

Media engagement has three key facets (Dahle 2014b):

1. *Media awareness:* a worldview approach to media literacy, analysis, and critique;
2. *Media presence:* faithful involvement within mainstream news, documentary, and entertainment media; and,
3. *Media ministries:* authentic and relevant pre-evangelism, evangelism and discipling through media platforms by communicating a holistic biblical worldview.

Media engagement begins with identifying media influences from a worldview perspective (Sire 2009, 22) by examining underlying beliefs and assumptions (Clark et al. 2017, 90). Furthermore, media engagement focusses on how Christians can contribute within influential media spaces in the wider society and communicating contextually relevant messages based on an integrated biblical worldview (Samples 2007, 274). In addition, media engagement centres on how to equip followers of Jesus to engage with media as disciples and witnesses, and how to enable them to teach others to engage well with media.

During the global pandemic, people have been prevented from meeting in-person, from travelling, and often from moving around locally. Therefore, many have engaged more extensively with news media, entertainment media, and social media, both professionally and privately. However, the coronavirus period has challenged fundamental perspectives and life priorities of people, and thus also has affected how people relate to and consume media.

When followers of Jesus become equipped to engage well with media, they can integrate such media engagement into their life, work, and witness to shape communities (Kabutz and

Dahle 2019). With such an integrated perspective on media, they can use media to nurture a holistic and meaningful everyday life that may lead towards deep transformation. Moreover, Christian influencers collaborating to develop further resources for media engagement helps more people to explore their appropriate roles and relationships with media.

This article explores the process of engaging with media on journeys of transformation. Such a journey begins by having a personal relationship with God and by relating closely with other people. Such relationships lead to engaging interactions and appropriate ways of influencing one another through media. The process continues with equipping Christians personally to engage well with media, so they may train others about media engagement. Finally, this media influence leads towards transformed lives and communities with authentic local applications of media engagement.

Relating to God Individually

A faith journey begins as an individual enters into a relationship with God. Some people begin with a conversion experience, while others come to personal faith over a longer period. God can take people through substantial healing, while they learn to trust God and become vulnerable to God's shaping.

Mediated messages can play a significant role in such faith journeys. God can communicate intimately to someone personally through his mediated message of the Bible. As a disciple lives in close relationship with God, he/she can become aware of media messages, which either nurture or distract from his/her personal relationship with God. As people express their relationship with God in daily life, their home and place of work can be affected by their faith. As they model their relationship with God in their interactions with people, these relationships can further impact the lives of others. When they interact through media with one another, the influence of their interactions can spread even wider.

Media engagement is imbedded in the 'Three Great Commissions' (Watkins 2021). Christians are commissioned to:

1. care for all the earth, which is 'The Creation Commission';
2. bring comprehensive goodness and wholeness to all nations, which may be called 'The Blessing Commission'; and
3. make and mature disciples, which is 'The Gospel Commission'.

Jesus also provided 'The Great Commandment' that prioritises loving God and one another. Based on this biblical framework, Christians are aware and cautious of the challenges in the world around them, while they are active and involved in contributing to the world. Christians' informed involvements lead them to engage responsibly with media by consuming carefully and contributing constructively.

Relating to One Another

Media can play an important role in nurturing community. The journeys of faith are lived in community, not in solitude (Rhodes 2016, 139-155). As human beings we only really find our identity and discover ourselves within the relational context of a community. Also, we learn to contribute according to our gifts and abilities within a community space. Through close interactions we experience the challenges of relationships, which then enables us to mature as individuals. As God calls people to follow him, he transforms them from within to love and relate well to others. When Christians meet and interact via media, they can nurture fellowships of trust and grace (Lynch et al. 2016, 79). They can develop love for their local communities, where together they can equip disciple-makers who may transform society through their love

and witness. Caution is needed when media distracts from relationships (Chapman and Pellicane 2014; Koch 2015).

Through Christian communities, people can journey into much deeper relationships with one another. They learn to accept each other, forgive, reconcile, and envision a thriving future. Media tools can be effective for mutual equipping and encouragement, for sharing valuable Bible resources, and even for deep personal conversations through video conferencing (Detweiler 2013, 14-15). Through the regular interactions in relational communities, people then influence each other.

Interacting with Each Other through Media

We as human beings are communicative and as such build and nurture relationships through our interactions with others. When we can meet face-to-face, direct communication takes place. When we are unable to meet in-person, we need some form of medium to transmit our messages to each other. Then we are interacting through media.

Humanity has increasingly communicated through mediated messages, interacting across different spaces and times. People have recorded messages on various media devices that can be sent almost anywhere. They can receive mediated messages from people in the past, and they can transmit their own mediated messages to people in the future. People are nowadays not just using media, but they are actually living in the media (Deuze 2008, 233). As they communicate messages to one another, they influence others through media while they themselves also become influenced. And when their messages move even wider beyond single-person interactions, their mediated influence extends even further.

By nurturing relationships, people build trust and open themselves to becoming influenced by others. Even influence through media is built on trust; the more people trust, the more they influence. Such trust is cultivated by telling powerful stories that build on the narrative of many interactions with which people can identify (Cosper 2014, 24). These stories then re-shape people's perspectives on reality when combined with their experiences, views, relationships in community, and deeper experiences in life. Through compelling stories shared in community, people may grow in trust, which then will shape their sense of belonging and enable them to influence one another.

When people increasingly interact on emotional levels, relationships deepen. Media influences become more meaningful through "emotional interactions" as someone:

- listens with the heart to the needs of the other, sharing both joy and sadness with one another;
- feels the other's pain and disappointment, coming alongside him/her, and inspiring each other to look beyond the pain;
- responds to the other with emotional cues and experiences so the other really feels heard; and,
- shares in the excitement and hope for life, walking together towards healing and transformation.

Through these trusting emotional interactions between people, influencing through media can become more authentic and significant.

Influencing Each Other through Media

The essence of media engagement is about exploring the influence that media has on an individual as well as how that person moves within media spaces of influence and contributes

to media himself/herself. In the same way, groups of people may ask themselves how media influences them, and how they can live authentically within media contexts and contribute through their combined media ministries. These questions can help Christians explore various aspects of media influence:

1. How are people *influenced by* media messages?
2. How do people *think deeply* about influences from media contexts? (Carr 2011, 123)
3. How do people *live within* media spaces of influence?
4. How do people *respond to* media messages amongst them?
5. How does *God influence others through media messages people* contribute?

Media influence often leads to change. Processes of positive change begin by listening to God and to other people. Change then continues as people digest and process the messages they have heard. When they act on new information received, they begin to "change" what they do, and then become able to speak to other people about the change happening in them. Listening and changing oneself needs to occur before speaking into the media context (Kabutz 2020).

Gospel influence through media leads to meaningful personal transformation. God can enable a healing of brokenness in a person's life and can establish his/her self-identity in him. Jesus can transform someone into a renewed person, even when not all challenges are resolved. On their discipleship journeys, people can envision desired changes and help one another implement appropriate actions to address relevant personal and social issues.

Beyond the coronavirus pandemic, engaging with people through media will take on a specific focus. This focus will involve exploring the changing roles of media messages as well as identifying new places and messages to contribute as media influencers. Media awareness, media presence, and media ministries will all be involved.

With respect to *media awareness* beyond the coronavirus, the equipped disciple will need to think critically about all kinds of emerging media messages, explore their changing meaning, and evaluate various emerging worldviews behind these media messages that are shaping different ways of thinking (Wilkens and Sanford 2009, 198). A responsible media user is aware of conflicting messages addressing the key themes of the day, relating them carefully to a biblical worldview. Beyond the coronavirus, such discernment will include evaluating how both media technologies and media messages have shifting influences (Lanier 2011; Chen 2012, 4), some beneficial, but others harmful (Huddleston 2016).

In exercising *media presence* beyond the coronavirus, equipped disciples must move with integrity into newly emerging places of media influence. They should equip, encourage and resource other Christian influencers who are already within mainstream media spaces. Together they may explore innovative mainstream media platforms that are emerging as relevant spaces for providing powerful voices into society.

Media ministries beyond the coronavirus should entail Christian communicators speaking intentionally and contextually with rich biblical content into emerging issues of society. These communicators will need to produce fresh quality media content that cuts through clutter, while being aware of the limitations of media reach within the constantly growing media world. In addition to Christian communication channels, Christian influencers should explore and try out new media spaces for pre-evangelism, evangelism, and discipleship purposes.

Beyond the crisis of the coronavirus, Christian voices from a variety of sectors of society will need to speak into changing situations both for the church and the wider society in order to shape cultures (Turner 2013, 46). These voices of influence must address challenges, inspire holistic transformation, and contribute hope and healing into communities (Wilkens and

Sanford 2009, 16). Through various media platforms, Christian influencers can express and develop their unique voices to benefit society at large.

Helping Each Other on Journeys with Media

Media engagement plays an important role in equipping people on their journeys of faith and in life. The Lausanne Media Engagement Network (Lausanne Movement n.d.a; n.d.b) has provided numerous workshops to equip people for engaging with media, mainly in East Africa and Europe amongst media practitioners, Christian leaders, teachers, and youth leaders, as well as at international Lausanne conferences. The training has provided theological foundations for media engagement together with practical tools for how to analyse media, connect with media houses, and produce inspirational media content. The workshops have helped participants to engage with media both for personal spiritual growth and for the transformation of their communities. Ultimately, the various workshops have functioned as training to equip people to become competent in teaching others about engaging with media.

Helping Others to Journey in Life

Helping another person begins in small steps by coming alongside them. What a person learns on his/her faith journey, he/she can use to inspire others for their faith journeys. When a group of influencers learn to trust Jesus together, they can equip another group on their communal journeys of faith. When they become vulnerable towards others and develop trust, they can love them by addressing their actual needs (Thrall et al. 1999, 68). Equipping people to engage well with media also begins on a personal level, then expands as communities of people equip others for media.

Equipping for media engagement can help individual media contributors in social media, groups of people in churches interacting with media as an online church, and organisations contributing media content into various media spaces. People can be equipped with *key practices* for each facet of media engagement. Simple *practical exercises* help people to apply and internalise these media concepts. Each *inspiring story* shows how people are practically implementing media engagement in their local contexts.

Equipping People towards Media Awareness:

- *Practices*: Christians learn to identify and analyse worldviews that are embedded in media messages, and how to evaluate and critique media messages. They learn to formulate and communicate from a biblical worldview perspective and learn how to discuss media messages and their underlying worldviews with their families, friends, and colleagues in their local communities.
- *Exercise*: The articles in a daily newspaper or lyrics from a popular local song can be used to analyse underlying worldviews embedded in media messages.
- *Story*: A Christian media practitioner hosted a "reading competition" for youth in Kenya. After the learners read a book on media critique (Telfer 2015), they wrote an essay to reflect on their experiences with the media. The book's author attended the prize-giving and then presented media awareness workshops for the parents. Furthermore, the youth learned about becoming aware of the media they consume through regular media topics in a local Christian youth magazine.

Equipping People towards Media Presence:

- *Practices*: Inspire Christians to enter mainstream media spaces intentionally and equip them to live as credible witnesses within various facets of society, especially within workplaces in various mainstream media.

- *Exercise*: Identify a Christian working in mainstream media and develop a friendship to encourage and motivate this person in his/her professional work.
- *Story*: A media-focussed pastor in Uganda visited local media stations, praying with the staff, encouraging them, and nurturing relationships with them. Initially they were very sceptical of the church and only reported on its problems, but later they became more open also to report on inspiring church initiatives.

Equipping People toward Media Ministries:

- *Practices*: Equip Christians to assess the needs of an audience in order to create relevant gospel media messages and to tell meaningful stories on a personal level.
- *Exercise*: Simply take a smartphone to record a short video that addresses a current issue, either by interviewing a person or by filming a local situation. Contribute clear ideas through personal perspectives and share the video on accessible media channels.
- *Story*: A church in Uganda wanted to contribute gospel messages for Easter over television, but they did not have their own station. They visited a local TV station and proposed providing an Easter message. The station offered a broadcasting slot at midnight over the weekend. The pastors arrived in the middle of the night and presented their prepared Easter messages to the audience.

Once people have learned how to engage with media themselves, they can then become equipped to help other people engage well with media.

Equipping People to Help Others Engage in Media

Training Christians to teach media engagement can have great impact, but they must be provided with resources they can use to equip others.

For media awareness:

- provide simple tools for worldview analysis of media messages that Christians can pass on to others;
- equip Christians to teach worldview thinking about media through the church and through educational institutions; and,
- facilitate Christian apologists to train younger apologists with tools, opportunities, and internship experiences so they learn to address life-issues and key questions within various contexts.

For media presence:

- motivate pastors and Christian teachers to inspire their youth to explore creative media work, including looking for opportunities within mainstream media;
- equip participants to hold seminars within local churches that can help Christian influencers to communicate relevantly and clearly within secular media spaces; and,
- help participants to encourage mature media professionals to coach and mentor younger Christians in mainstream media.

For media ministries:

- equip Christians to help others find their own passion, calling, and voice to express their stories through media;
- provide tools to Christians for focussing primarily on relationships with others and then utilising media channels to engage with them; and,

- help Christian media communicators intentionally to equip younger communicators to contribute their own media messages.

A Story of Equipping Christians to Engage with Media

Over the course of one year, a young Christian leader in Uganda who attended media engagement training workshops became a local media engagement influencer. He travelled to various regions with his bishop where he trained groups of pastors on media awareness, who then could equip their congregations. This leader also interacted with media professionals by caring for their needs and hosting events about media presence. Furthermore, this man contributed to media ministries by addressing the local issues of reconciliation by providing media content to local media houses and nation-wide broadcasters. He applied the media engagement training as he equipped many others to spread wholesome media influence into various facets of Ugandan society.

A Tool for Equipping Christians to Learn about Media Issues

One tool for equipping people is the Lausanne Global Classroom on media and technology (Burdick n.d.), which addresses faithful discipleship in a world increasingly shaped by media and technology. The online videos and the user guide of this Global Classroom enable critical thinking about and creative engagement with media and technology.

Those media practitioners who are teaching "media engagers" can help each other by building relationships through collaborative networks where they can share their experiences and helpful resources. Such collaborative training for engaging with media widens the media influence.

Experiencing Gospel Transformation

When media is used as a platform for appropriate influence, God can use it for transformation. Such transformation occurs as God engages with a person, enabling him/her to experience spiritual renewal through the gospel, and then to journey through deep personal discipleship towards personal restoration and maturity. This journey changes the person's thinking processes, emotional engagement, and perspectives of community. The transformation also changes the understanding of self-identity through life experiences and the perception of life-fulfilment through relationship with God and others. Self-identity can be significantly misshaped, as well as redeemed by media (Detweiler 2018, 200). A sense of calling can be developed towards making personal contributions to the community (Lynch et al. 2016, 84-87).

Such transformation usually occurs on a very deep level personally before expanding within groups of people or amongst organised structures in communities (Quinn 1996, 32). Transformations occur both as short once-off occurrences as well as over longer periods. As individuals are transformed through the gospel, renewal of the social and physical environment can result.

As God reconciles the world with himself, transformations begin as God relates and interacts with individual persons. God wants to relate to people in a way that restores them individually, bringing them closer to others and enabling them to be more intimately connected with their whole environment. This multifaceted restoration may lead to personal transformation and to authentic living as salt and light for the gospel. Broader interactions with communities through media then lead towards wider gospel transformation.

Applying Media Engagement

Whether individually or collectively, Christians may engage within media spaces with the following practices and results in view:

1. Individual Christians, who have a personal relationship with God, deepen their knowledge and life-application of a biblical worldview through intentional media engagement.
2. Christians become more self-aware of their spiritual journeys, individually and in community, and learn how media tools help them on their journeys.
3. Followers of Jesus become aware of underlying worldviews in media messages that influence their own lives and learn how to consume and interact wisely with these messages.
4. Christians discover how to move into influential media spaces, where they professionally contribute contextual media messages that are consistent with a biblical worldview.
5. Followers of Jesus find their own unique voice to contribute value to others through their relationships and their authentic contributions embodied in media messages.
6. Christian media influencers distribute media messages, interact with people online, and use virtual, physical, and hybrid spaces to nurture community and enable faith journeys.
7. Christian leaders become trained to equip others for engaging with media, so that communities of people may resource the wider church for engaging well with media.
8. Christians contribute with multiple voices in various media channels, addressing real-life issues with messages of hope through practical care and witness, so that people in society are drawn to the gospel and follow Jesus.

Both personal and social transformation becomes effective and practical when the various facets of media engagement all work together.

Concluding Reflections on Media Engagement beyond the Coronavirus

Fruitful media engagement begins with developing personal intimacy with God, which leads towards journeying together with one another in community. Relationships between people through appropriate interactions may result in constructive influence, especially as people interact intentionally through media. When Christians carefully evaluate the media messages they consume, they learn what is influencing them. The voices of Christian individuals, of the church community, and of Christian organisations through intentional media interactions may then have a significant impact on society.

When Christians are equipped to engage well with media, and trained to teach others about media engagement, then their voices as disciples and witnesses are amplified. As Christians engage holistically with media, their relational influence may lead towards transformation whereby God shapes individuals and communities with the gospel.

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