

The Influence of the Mass Media on the Christian and the Response of the Church

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores how the mass media affects the Christian faith and how the Church responds to this challenge. The Church can respond by strengthening the efforts of education and continuous formation of the faithful regarding the correct interpretation of the faith in the changing context of the mass media. While challenges exist, the Church can respond through a strategic approach, promoting education, developing spiritual discernment, and actively engaging in dialogue and effective communication. This active response can help maintain the integrity of the Christian faith in an ever-changing media environment. The Church can use mass media to promote its messages and values, using modern means such as podcasts, online platforms, and social networks to communicate effectively with believers and the general public. The Church can also pay special attention to training its leaders to be prepared to address the specific challenges of the media's impact on the Christian faith.

KEYWORDS: Church, society, media, faith, impact, God, freedom, communication

Introduction

Mass media has become an omnipresent force in contemporary society, having a significant impact on individual and collective life. Christianity, as one of the most widespread religions, is not immune to the influence of the mass media. The impact of mass media on the Christian faith is a complex phenomenon with multiple aspects and consequences. Mass media can influence how people perceive and adopt social values and norms.

Mass media can contribute to the individualization of faith, allowing believers to choose their own religious interpretations and practices. This can lead to diversity but also to fragmentation in Christian communities. Mass media has become a crucial actor in the contemporary social landscape, affecting various aspects of human life, including the religious sphere. Mass media has contributed to the globalization of religious communities by connecting believers around the world.

The contemporary Church is now more connected and aware of cultural and theological diversity. Encouraging the development of spiritual discernment is essential to help believers filter and evaluate media content according to their Christian principles. The church has developed an active presence on various social networks, facilitating interaction with believers and providing a way to share its message and values in an accessible and interactive way. In a world in which the free circulation of information is guaranteed, the right to information is considered one of the fundamental human rights (Audiovisual Law 1992); the problem that arises is whether, in the absence of a valorization of information, this right does not turn against man. It has been noticed that the world has a huge appetite for information, and the mass media takes care to continuously feed this thirst, stimulating its curiosity, a curiosity that is often sterile, if not even evil.

The impact of mass media on man

In one form or another, the mass media is omnipresent in society, extending its influence directly or indirectly on everyone. Thus, the Christian is subjected to a continuous bombardment of information, which depersonalizes him and makes him lose his self-awareness. The development of the technique led to the emergence of increasingly attractive media tools, likely to create a real fascination for the recipient. The mass media thus end up imposing values and behaviors. Under these conditions, it was noted that the mass media represents a power in the state, but it is not a power in itself, but a power in someone's hand. As long as those who hold this power are of good faith, pursuing the development of the human personality, education (Rotaru 2021b, 190-196) in the spirit of authentic values (Rotaru 2021a, 87-92), and the closeness of man to God, everything is fine. Unfortunately, experience proves that things are not like that. The society we live in is not a Christian society, but a secularized one where permissiveness and relativity of values are the new social views imposed on everyone, especially through the mass media (Timiadis 1997). Secular areas of life are seen as autonomous, i.e., carried by their own values, principles, and motivations, different from religious ones" (Schmemmann 1995, 115). As Clement remarked:

Secularized society is a society in which, most often, silence rules, as far as God is concerned. In many environments it has become impolite and even obscene to talk about God. Modesty about God has taken the place of modesty about sex; more than modesty, a real inhibition; what our ascetics call oblivion, that is, a kind of spiritual sleep that can be very agitated and that the media, in moments of respite, fills with prefabricated dreams (Soare 2001, 47).

The misunderstood freedom of information circulation has made the mass media a source of dangerous information, of false and unreal ideas, in the absence of a coherent system of authentic values. The competition between the different

media channels and the desire to gain the widest possible audience, thus leads to the dissemination of increasingly harmful messages, by exalting violence and eroticism, cultivating pride and greed, disparagement and nonsense. The myth of stars, proposed as universal models, is promoted. Man thus ends up no longer living himself, but surrendering his experiences to models, falling into clichés. But, these stars, most of the time, make a pride of their immorality and affirm their adherence to different sects and syncretistic movements. The effect is devastating, especially on young people at the age of looking for models and identifying with them, and can be seen in the entire attitude of teenagers, from clothing to behavior. By isolating religion in the sphere of personal subjectivism, secularism opened the way to the pulverization of European Christianity in the dust of religious movements that proclaim their creeds more and more loudly. The search for the sacred is a defining element of the human condition, and when the way of the Gospel has been abandoned or forgotten, this search can take on the most harmful forms.

Losing spiritual values, the secularized man takes refuge in pseudo-religion. This is why at level H of the European consciousness two main trends in the search for religiosity can be noticed today: "Jesus without the Church", that is, the expression of the longing for "direct and pure" religious experience, and "Religion without the Church", meaning the tendency towards esotericism. Secularism (Rotaru 2006, 251-266) thus becomes the mother of subjective fantasies that can reach the most aberrant manifestations.

Modern secularism promoted by the mass media is characterized not by a denial of religious values, but by a confusion of values in which there is no longer any objective criterion of truth, by establishing the equality of religious values with other values (eluding the fact that religious values are integrative values) and by syncretism. Saint Maximus the Confessor remarked that the life of fallen man is a pursuit of pleasure and a run away from pain and that only the Savior Christ can "break" this circle. To a large extent, the mass media takes advantage of this behavior of fallen man, promoting a philosophy of finding man in pleasure, giving the illusion of the possibility of its continuous acquisition in the absence of pain. This philosophy is primarily promoted by advertising, which occupies a very important place in the mass media due to the financial dependence on it.

The influence of advertising on society

The omnipresence of the mass media means that no one can escape the influence of advertising. The result of intense demographic, geographic, behavioral studies, advertising shapes the way of understanding life, the world, one's own existence, especially regarding the motivations of selection criteria and behavior, having an indirect but strong impact on society.

The functions of advertising are to inform and convince the potential customer to purchase. But, in the conditions of fierce competition, advertising tries more and more to seduce, bringing deceptive arguments, cultivating pride, exploiting vile behaviors, stimulating artificial needs and distorting reality. In general, advertising promotes the profoundly anti-Christian idea that happiness and full self-realization is acquired through the consumption of certain products or services. (Communications 1997, 5-6). As a result, the hierarchy of values is falsified, cultivating euphoria, hedonism, narcissism and individualism, disturbing the relationship to the real world by offering an illusory world from which struggle, suffering, failure have disappeared. The type of individual who only knows how to live by appropriating everything is being promoted: possessing, consuming, consuming instead of contemplating (Brune 1996). The main advertising maneuvers consist of:

- ✦ to reduce the individual's aspirations to things;
- ✦ to frustrate by awakening some nostalgia whose fulfillment is promised through consumption;
- ✦ to eroticize the products promoting the idea that man exists only for sex, and the sexual experience is lived in consumption;
- ✦ to alienate by conforming the human being to the products;
- ✦ to infantilize the consumer. Advertising language bypasses the rational defense system:
 - ✦ anesthetizing intelligence through rhetorical procedures, the abandonment of the principle of contradiction, the perversion of the principle of identity, the loss of the principle of rationality, the confusion of values, and, on the other hand, the overdevelopment of cerebral automatism, of thoughtless behaviors, reflexes;
 - ✦ increasing credibility through pseudo-evidence of the image;
 - ✦ arousing and manipulating the public's emotions;
 - ✦ laying traps for consciousness through a network of voices and melodies.

Advertising thus transposes man into a world of abundance where objects rush to conform to personal will, thus breaking him from reality and diverting him from the essential problems of life, towards materiality. "In the context of asserting the autonomy of man and the world, Bonhoeffer said, there is no longer any need for God as a working hypothesis, either in morality, politics or science" (Letters and Papers from Prison 1968, 121). In other words, God is no longer involved in man's destiny, in the sense that he is no longer considered the Proniator (*Proniator-God's provision for all people's needs and in all situations and circumstances of their lives. 2. Supreme divinity, deity, God; providence; care, mercy, mercy, etc., considered as attributes of divinity*) who gives authentic meaning to the world and history. His rightful place God thus remained empty in the consciousness of modern man, that is, just right to be populated with phantasms, anguish and obsessions. This absence of God

from the consciousness of secularized Europe actually annihilates any truth of life, apart from that of corruption and death.

This absence, of a frightening tragedy, clearly defines the content of European nihilism and religious indifferentism as a mass phenomenon, with all the disastrous consequences that these phenomena entail (Yannaras 1996, 7-9). Television currently has the strongest impact among the means of mass communication. It is addressed to the most sensitive but also the most corruptible human sense, sight. Through the eyes, man first of all makes contact with the world, with external reality. It was not by chance that Christ the Redeemer drew attention to the fact that the eye can become the "gateway to sin" (Mat. 18:9), because "if your eye is evil, your whole body will be dark" (Mat. 6:23) (Nicolescu 1997, 112).

Karl Popper, one of the theorists of the "open society" believed that "television has become a colossal political power in potential; one could even say the greatest of all as if it were the Word of God itself" (Badea 1998, 3).

According to this analyst, in contemporary society television tends to take the place of God. In the following, we will try to present some elements that make the impact of television so strong.

- Television transforms the event, the reality into a show, meeting the human need for spectacle and thus creating pleasure. It aims at the original and the agreeable in relation to the complexity and depth of life. Watching television, the individual has the impression that he dominates the world;

- Television seeks to create a comfortable imaginary, changes the meaning of reality by replacing it with fiction, offers an illusory world in which experiencing pleasure suppresses responsibility, offers the pleasure of general consensus by returning to a certain primitivism and the pleasure of stability in the atmosphere of illusions by leaving reality. In this sense, the series play an important role in keeping man in an illusory but stable reality, offering him models of behavior;

- Television is usually a faithful propagator of the ideology of modern society that supports total permissiveness and the relativity of values. As a result, it is not surprising the frequent presence on screens of exacerbated eroticism and extreme violence which, at the same time, fascinates and perverts.

The love between a man and a woman is reduced to sexuality, the partner becoming only a pleasure-producing object that, when it no longer fulfills its function, is changed. It is concerning how much this model has "caught" among the younger generation.

Specialists talk about a real hypnotic effect that television has on the viewer. In any case, it is clear that television is addictive, behaving like a real drug. Man's attitude towards it often becomes vicious: he realizes its harmfulness, he hates it and yet he willingly falls prey to it. Although it seems like an easy way to banish loneliness, television does not solve this problem, but, on the contrary, contributes to isolation, offering only the illusory solution of escaping from reality (Nicolescu

1997, 113). The television is a great devourer of time, becoming a continuous presence in human life. Or, knowing that time is "the interval between his loving call God and the response of personal love; no Christian can afford to waste it."

The temptation of television manipulation in the field of information is particularly great because:

- has a strong emotional effect due to the presentation of images;
- allows imperceptible tricks;
- allows the use of subliminal messages (Bucur 1997, 3).

Secularization, therefore, can be defined as "the process of changing orientation that includes a religious dimension for thought and action with one centered on the world itself as the only perceived reality" (McKim 1996, 253). It can be said that secularization is characterized by three aspects: a decrease in religiosity, a narrowing of the meaning of religion and an internal secularization, which considers an adaptation of religion to the ideas of modernity. Therefore, specified Marko Rupnik:

Today, when humanity finds itself in a terminal phase of the secularization process, when the denial and alienation from God no longer offers any aspiration, the man matured in the fire of humiliations, failures and sufferings that marked every step of this journey, is in the situation of the prodigal son in the Savior's parable, "coming to his senses" and seriously meditating on returning to God and to himself (Oros 1998, 65-66).

Subliminal messages are images or texts imperceptible to the naked eye but which are registered by the subconscious, influencing the behavior and way of thinking of the viewer. Without being a bad thing in itself as long as it is limited to the transmission of information, television becomes harmful when it distances man from God, even more so when a TV station tries to impose itself as a true idol by claiming not only admiration, but also adoration, total inner conformity to the ideas it systematically proposes (immediate gain, immediate satisfaction, the illusion of quickly lived well-being, the pleasure in which man likes to indulge in dreaming while forgetting about the real situation) and aiming to shape a entire generations in this sense.

The Internet has, in turn, an increasingly strong impact, tending to monopolize the attention of the young generation through the unsuspected possibilities it opens up. Its special attractiveness comes from the fact that it opens up the possibility of active participation of the user in retrieving the information. The advantages and disadvantages of television are also present in this case. However, the possibility of manipulation is much greater by sneaking in false information and blocking access to certain information. One of the truly satanic applications of the Internet is the possibility of entering a virtual reality, in the creation of which man can participate freely. The boundary between reality and

fantasy is thus abolished, man remaining disarmed in front of the devil. As George Uscătescu also wrote:

The culture of the West feels that both its instinctive forces and its religious and ethical experience are decaying. Formalism dominates his creation, skepticism, the very roots of his belief and metaphysical motivations. In Western culture, reason has subjected everything to discussion, and the result is that everything is subject to lack of reason (Ciolan 1987, 70).

The great tragedy of Christianity, besides its compromise with the world whose structures are becoming more and more opaque to the glory of God and the compromising of the idea of "Christian duty", is its transformation into a "religion among others". This means that in the life of the secularized European, Christ no longer counts as the true God of the true God, incarnated for the salvation of man and the world, but as a simple founder of religion, along with other exemplary figures of the history of religion.

The Church is considered an outdated, intolerant, fundamentalist, or reactionary institution. Not infrequently, the religious factor is considered a residual phenomenon in the life of the modern world, which will die out as modernization and globalization (Rotaru 2014, 532-541) root their own myths in people's consciousness. The main victims of the mass media are children, they do not have the power of discernment and take uncritically everything that is transmitted to them. Studies conducted in the USA show that most children, although they are also looking for entertainment, follow the media because they want to understand the world. As John Condry pointed out: "Children find it more difficult - because of their limited power of understanding - to discern between fact and fiction, being thus much more vulnerable than adults (Badea 1998, 7). The mass media can therefore be a source of dangerous information, promoting the relativism of values and permissiveness on all channels and by all means. Those who follow the mass media assiduously are more aggressive, indifferent to the problems of their peers, eager for the easiest possible enrichment and indifferent to Christian moral values. In an unequal society, the market thus becomes an instrument of amplifying inequalities. Max Weber noted very well that:

When the market is abandoned to its own legitimacy, it shows consideration only for things, not at all for persons, not for the duties of fraternity or piety, and not so much for the original human relations, proper to personal communities (Koninck 2001, 36).

It can therefore be said that when respect for the human person as a principle of personal ethos is abandoned, the principles of economy, power and the ability to influence the masses become idols that are worshiped as such.

In conclusion, it can be said that we are dealing with "a supposed disappearance of the supernatural" (Berger 1990, 1) or a "myth of religious decline"

(Stark 1998, 1). To what has been said so far, we can add the fact that in Romania, as in the whole world, there is a strong informational war through which certain centers of power try to control society. Some of the stages through which dependence on power centers is achieved are:

- creating a state of "fascination" of the political class at the beginning of its formation.

- based on this effect of fascination, which actually means blocking the critical function of the mechanism for evaluating the values presented to him, the politician creates laws in accordance with the requirements of the power centers without being aware of this. And all politicians ensure that these laws are respected;

- distancing the population from the fundamental problems of the economy and society by "drugging" them with irrelevant information, especially in the area of miscellaneous facts (Bucur 1997, 3).

As a result, it is not surprising that programs that reflect Christian spirituality have a low weight in the mass media. In this context, direct attacks against the Church periodically appear. It is obvious that these attacks are directed by certain power centers aimed at decreasing trust in the Church. The media's attack against the Church is not limited to direct attacks, however. All the negative elements that have been identified above regarding the impact of mass media on man, are in fact an attack against the Church, humanity restored in Christ. The mass media product is the depersonalized and lonely man, emptied of self-awareness, fed with advertising and infused with the hedonistic ideology of contemporary society. The idols promoted by the mass media, namely wealth, pleasure and worldly cares, are, according to the parable of the sower, the thorns that stifle the fruition of the Word of God in the human heart (Luke 8:14). It should be remembered, however, as St. Siluan also said: "If you love power and money, you will never know the love of God" (Athonite 1998, 170). Christians must therefore be aware of the harmfulness of the contemporary mass media and understand that the continuous pressure they are subjected to from it can influence them even without being aware of it. It can be said, as Brooks did, that "secularization does not represent the future, but the past's incorrect vision of the future" (Brooks 2003).

The Church's response to ongoing media pressure

Church servants, by virtue of the charisma they have, are obliged to make believers aware of these dangers, recommending moderation in media consumption, through a rigorous selection of programs and publications. Man's communion with God through Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit is the beginning and goal of the Christian life seen from the eschatological perspective. According to Solovyov:

This civilization elaborated particular forms and external materials for life, but did not give mankind the inner content of life itself; after bringing out

certain isolated elements, he brought them to the maximum degree of development, as far as this is possible in their separation, but he left them without an organic connection and therefore devoid of living spirit, for which reason all this wealth is dead capital (Soloviov 1971, 48).

A few recommendations are particularly important in this respect:

- Be a critical thinker.
- Don't believe everything you read or hear.
- Teach your children to feel uncomfortable in front of everything that is inappropriate.
- Pay attention to the classification of the shows. Many shows considered valuable or successful promote immorality.
- Set limits regarding the time spent in front of the television.
- Give the children the opportunity to ask or discuss what they see. In this way, they will be able to develop their own ability to analyze what they see or hear.

The Church should ask for and participate in the development of ethical codes to be respected by media producers, codes that ensure truthfulness, respect for the dignity of the human person and social responsibility. Faced with the pressure of the contemporary mass media that pushes man towards the old life without Christ, which is actually death, the Church must insist on living the new life in Christ. Freed from the "informational bombardment" in this way, time and energy are saved, which can be used for prayer and for returning to oneself and to the essential problems of life, for rediscovering the personal relationship with God and with fellow human beings. The mission of the Church still remains that of testifying before people the words of the new life given by Christ in order to make those who receive the word in faith partakers of this life. The mission of the Church can only be based on the experience of knowing God. Living and applying Christian teachings is, thus, precisely the domain of Christian morality. Florenski specified the following in this regard:

Not one of the different spheres of existence - art, philosophy, science, politics, economics, etc. - it cannot be considered an independent essence, but it is only about representations that take, indeed, the forms dictated by the laws of this world, but only at certain moments and under certain conditions, more precisely only for so long and only to the extent in which the culture, taken as a whole, refuses to structure itself according to the figure of Christ. In the sphere of culture, if you are not with Christ, you are inevitably against Him, because in life there is no and there can be no neutrality in relation to God. Christianity cannot remain passive in the face of the world and cannot indifferently assume every element, as if it were something that goes well on its own anyway. The spirit cannot be passive: it can appropriate anything

and can use anything, but only after it has transfigured it in accordance with the figure of Christ (Florenski 1924, no.4, 52-53).

The Church must take full advantage of the media tools to make the message of the Gospel reach as many people as possible, taking into account the specifics of communication through the mass media. However, this does not mean neglecting the direct relationship, the impact of the word being much stronger, because it not only transmits information, but also ensures the personal meeting, the transmission of moods and feelings. When the word is mediated by a communication channel, its impact is much less, the informational side prevailing. For example, the impact of the word spoken by a "spiritual father" in a direct meeting is completely different, compared to the same word received through a recording. The impact of mass media on the contemporary Church is therefore a complex phenomenon, including significant changes in communication, social relations and the formation of public opinion. The Church must approach these changes wisely, managing the challenges and capitalizing on the opportunities to strengthen its message and influence in an ever-evolving digital world. Emphasizing the importance of an authentic Christian life, Solovyov concluded:

In the ancient world it was enough to contemplate divinity as an idea. The new world, which has already seen divinity as a real appearance, can no longer limit itself to contemplation. She must live and act by virtue of the divine principle that is revealed in her, making herself again in the image and likeness of the living God. Humanity must not contemplate divinity, but make itself divine. According to this, the new religion cannot be only a worship of God, a worship, but must become an active divine work, that is, a work together of divinity and humanity to make, from the carnal and natural, that of to become spiritual and divine again (Soloviov 1998, 97).

Mass media provide opportunities for the Church to learn, connect and dialogue with a diverse audience. These opportunities can help increase mutual understanding and build bridges between diverse communities. However, too much media coverage can lead to a loss of authenticity and spiritual depth. Therefore, the Church must carefully manage the balance between the media and living the faith. The European mass media, especially the famous international dailies that create currents of opinion, have an anti-religious policy, if not simply anti-Christian. Likewise the profitable industry of cinematography and entertainment. It is obvious that a materialistic conception dominates in Europe, the destiny of the European citizen being played only at the level of earthly life. Hence the ridiculous and tragic rush for the highest possible standard of material wellbeing and comfort, the forcing of any possibilities of access to the pleasures of life, the obsessive preoccupation with physical health and beauty, the horror of aging and the anguish in the face of death.

The materialism of the consumer society is experienced in experiences devoid of any spiritual perspective: the obsession to earn as much money as possible, the desire to have as much fun as possible, the tyranny of fashion as a means to distinguish oneself from others or to be like others, the disregard sacrifice, escape from any social involvement, etc. Hence the fact that today, most Europeans are no longer able to give a clear answer to the question about the purpose of their life.

Whoever lives in such a dispersed environment has no way to assume a unitary vision of life. At this stage of history it is clear that the notion of tension between the ideals of the Gospel and the values of the world has faded in the Christian consciousness, which means that the idea of "Christian duty" has died.

Despite the visible collapse of so many so-called Christian empires, peoples, and states, countless Christians are still convinced that, in fact, all is well with the world and that they can happily accept its way of life, its values, and its priorities, paying simultaneously and their religious duties. [...] Moreover, the Church and Christianity are considered rather as means that should help to achieve a prosperous and happy life in this world, as a kind of "spiritual therapy" that allows all tensions and all conflicts to be resolved and which brings that inner balance that guarantees success, stability and happiness (Buga 1992, 50-51).

Given that the mass media provide a space for public debate on religious and ethical issues, the contemporary Church must navigate this environment, providing answers to the questions and criticism of the general public. The mass media play a significant role in shaping public perception of the Church, with news, broadcasts, and media analysis influencing public opinion about faith, practices, and social issues in which the Church is involved. On the other hand media communication has influenced group dynamics in communities of believers, and social relations have become more diverse and complex, sometimes generating tensions or changes in the traditional structures of the Church. Adaptability and discernment are therefore essential to successfully navigate this complex and dynamic environment.

The influence of the media on the Christian and the response of the Church it is therefore a complex and ever-evolving subject in the contemporary era where technology and communication have become integral parts of our daily lives. Analyzing this theme, it is evident that the media and Christianity interact in a variety of ways, and their impact on believers and Christian communities is the subject of intense and diverse debates. The media, in its various forms such as television, the Internet, print media, and social media, exerts a significant influence on Christian believers. Through these channels, messages, ideas and perspectives are transmitted and internalized in a rapid and extensive manner. The mass media can contribute to the enrichment of knowledge and the promotion of Christian values,

providing access to sermons, religious music, teachings and important events in the life of the Church. However, the media can also present significant challenges for believers and the Church as a whole. Excessive exposure to secularized or morally objectionable content can erode Christian values and undermine an individual's faith. Also, manipulation and distortion of information for commercial or political purposes can generate confusion and skepticism among believers.

Conclusions

In the face of these challenges, the Church must assume the responsibility to adequately respond to the influence of the mass media on the believers. First, education and spiritual formation become essential priorities to strengthen faith and develop critical discernment in the face of media content. The Church must encourage believers to carefully choose information sources and discern between messages that support Christian values and those that contradict them. The Church also has the opportunity to use the media for its own missionary and educational purposes. Using online platforms for evangelism, preaching, and spiritual instruction can expand the sphere of influence and bring the Christian message to a wider and more diverse audience.

In conclusion, the relationship between the mass media and Christianity is a complex and dynamic one that requires continuous attention and discernment on the part of believers and the Church. With a balanced and responsible approach, the media can become a valuable tool in promoting Christian values and strengthening individual and community faith.

The Church must therefore use the mass media to call people to an authentic life in Christ, but it must not lose sight of the fact that these media channels cannot replace the direct relationship of the minister with the believers. Using media tools, the Church must take into account the cultural context of the era, the "new culture" created by the mass media, and freeing itself from triumphalism, to find a language accessible to today's man.

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