

Media as a Bridge Between Religions and Cultures:

Marshal McLuhan's famous quote "the medium is the message" is one of the most relevant truths in communication in our world today. Information can easily be disseminated or omitted through the modes of communication and it would seem as if the medium itself has begun to take priority in our lives.

Over the course of the past two centuries organized media in the form of newspapers, radio, television and presently the World Wide Web has become increasingly important in the transmission of individual as well as societal messages. We are living in an exciting age in which media outlets can be used for a variety of purposes.

It should be the goal of all people to harness this media and use it as a nexus for dialogue in order to create true understanding between different religions and cultures.

INTERFAITH MEDIA AS A MEDIUM FOR UNDERSTANDING

The means of communication at human disposal have been used for a myriad of purposes including but not limited to expounding political diatribes, expressing religious prayer or even conducting hate speech in the public sphere. Yet whether the mediums are used for positive or negative ends is most certainly a product of the reader's, listener's or surfer's point of view.

What is clear is that the media in its present incarnation has the ability to be didactic in nature and help us to learn about one another as well as ourselves. One example of how the media can be used to create unity among various religious is the abundance of interfaith dialogue websites such as: "the Institute for Interfaith Dialogue" or "The Center for Dialogue" at La Trobe University in Australia which encourage people

from various religious to enter chat rooms or blogs about the religious issues that matter the most to them. In fact interfaith dialogue between religious is not a new subject.

Religions and well as interfaith groups have been coexisting in harmony for thousands of years; it is now time to use the media to allow individuals to learn even more about one another and make the interfaith connections that are needed greatly in today's world.

LEARNING LANGUAGES MEANS LEARNING ABOUT OTHERS

Secondly, the Internet is one aspect of the media which particularly encourages learning and cultural exchanges. A primary example which supports this claim is the remarkable number of educational websites which allow the viewer to learn a language or about a specific culture. Websites ranging from Rosetta Stone.com, Cervantes Institute or even TOEFL are a collection of both public and private organizations which have taken their goals and applied them to a 21st century learning prism. There is a collective understanding that by acquiring the communication tools of another culture, individuals on a one-to-one level can help to bridge the wide cultural divides that presently exist between many nations.

By investing your time and energy in learning the workings of another society, an individual can begin to feel empathy or even solidarity with the other culture. These introductory language learning websites can also be supplemented with more interactive tools such as MSN message or Skype which allow the individual to communicate directly with others in different parts of the world.

Whether the initial meeting takes place in a chat room or a classroom, the internet is the vehicle which can encourage and foster these relationships.

What needs to be devised is a way of dealing with the abundance of negative content on the internet. There should be some outlet to help reorient negative thoughts and encourage a more cultural relativistic point of view that evaluates the culture or religion according to its own social norms and rules rather than those of the “other” society.

This also must be considered under the auspices of the freedom of speech as well in order not to infringe upon this fundamental tool of expression that has in fact lead to the development of the Internet.

SEPARATING FACT FROM FICTION

Yet with the wealth of information available of the net today sometimes it is impossible to understand what is factual and what is not. Although it is the responsibility of the individual to consider the source and the reliability of the information made available, often times this can be confusing. Because it is in the public sphere, information on the internet can be akin to rumors. Without factual data, it seems just like rhetoric. This is one reason why keen internet search and evaluation skills must be taught to the individuals who access this information super highway. Accessing one website that makes unfounded claims can often lead to misinformation rather than improved communication. It also does not help us address the initial premise we began with which was to bridge cultural divides.

CONCLUSION

The media is an exciting tool which is integral to the present day's civilization. Simple daily actions such as checking email, reading online news sources, or even listening to music via a web portal have become commonplace in our lives. We have successfully been able to use the media as entertainment, sending messages and even learning, now is the time to take the media to the next level and use it as a tool to help individuals learn about one another and the many things they have in common. Only with continued use and evaluation of the media itself will the internet actually prove to be a worthwhile means for bridging the gap between our diverse cultures and beliefs.