

“Media Penetration, Impact, Trends and Resources”

Visual Story Network

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The Shift Is Well Underway

On the outside Tiffany and Jason are good students who attend church with their parents, but their lives are increasingly marked by sensuality, violence, narcissism and greed. Together they consume 40 hours a week of television, gaming, listening to their iPods and chatting online. They still manage to get good grades, play sports and attend youth group, but their worldview more resembles a teen gossip magazine than anything scriptural. They are unequipped to discriminate between pop culture and Christ-centered living. Every day they become more saturated by the negative messages of media and advertising, increasing the likelihood they will fall away from church after moving away from their parents.

Jacque, a freshman at the Sorbonne University in Paris, was smoking with three of his friends on a park bench at the Luxembourg Gardens. A student approached and asked if they would be willing to discuss a short film he had on his portable DVD player. Jacque, who had turned down many solicitors at the park before, thought this opportunity could be interesting. He surprised himself by spending 30 minutes discussing the parallels between a father and daughter in the film and his relationship with his own parents. He agreed to meet with the student a second time to explore how there may be a parallel to his relationship to God.

The world has become dramatically visual. Visual media delivered through a film, television, computer or handheld device screen is shaping the vision and changing the way people think and process information and arrive at conclusions about life. The experience of Tiffany and Jason can be multiplied by tens of millions of people in North America and beyond. There are increasing cases like that of Jacque, however, where visual media and story are used to turn hearts toward Jesus and His kingdom.

God has moved uniquely in the leadership of The JESUS Film Project, the Book of Hope, and Ethnographic Media to work together in assisting other ministries to aggressively explore new ways to leverage the power of visual media and the power of story for the sake of the gospel.

The JESUS Film Project documents 5.7 billion viewings of the classic film “JESUS” and other evangelistic content developed over the past 27 years. More than 200 million people have indicated decisions for Christ, and possibly a million churches have started through this outreach. The Book of Hope transitioned from a print-based model of outreach to one that includes “The God Man,” a 42-minute animated film illustrating the life of Christ. Since 1987, Book of Hope has distributed 489 million copies of a harmonized gospel for children. Since 2005, showings of the “God Man” in Latin America are typically followed by one out of three children and adults responding to the gospel. Ethnographic Media exists to create media to excite youth about the Bible. Their films “End of the Spear” and “Mrs. HIV” have reached millions.

We desire to engage the world with Jesus through a movement of visual story. The world is rapidly becoming more media sophisticated and saturated. The vision, values and destinies of billions of people are at stake. We believe it is critical that God’s people become more visual in its approach to evangelism, discipleship and church planting. We believe it will be impossible to fulfill the Great Commission if we do not “speak the language of visual story.” The Visual Story

Network is an emerging partnership seeking to “engage lost people with Jesus through a global movement of visual story.”

Paul Eshleman, founder of The JESUS Film Project®, noted a historic paradigm shift; from preach to print to portray. For 1,500 years the church grew through its ability to communicate through the preached Word. For the past 500 years, print has accelerated growth of the church. We are only beginning to effectively portray Christ and His kingdom in a way that is dynamically introducing more people to a life-changing relationship with Him.

In this paper we discuss four areas of preliminary findings as a result of secondary research: media penetration, trends in media, the impact of media and resources available.

Media Penetration and Its Impact on Use of Visual Media and Story

Television/DVD/Mobile Device prevalence in the United States continues to be high. The number of adults owning DVD players has grown from 18 percent in 2000 to 84 percent in 2005. Thirty-five percent of U.S. “tweens” (8- to 12-year-olds) own a mobile phone and 5 percent have access to the Internet on their phones. Of those with Internet access on their phones, 64 percent download music and 56 percent watch TV on their phones. The U.S. census reports that in 2007 each American adult and teen will spend an average of 3,518 hours consuming media—nearly five months worth of time.

The U.S. currently dominates the production of media for television, but this is changing. Over 39 countries, some of which lack running water, have their own version of “American Idol.” Even in places such as rural Swaziland, American TV shows occupy as much as one to two hours a day of teenagers’ time, with Jerry Springer being a top show. (Rob, can you confirm this). Though American media dominate, other nations are rapidly developing media-production capacity. India in Asia, Egypt in the Middle East, and Nigeria in sub-Saharan Africa are several examples.

There is much more to media than television and film. Underdeveloped countries continue to lag behind in installing wired Internet, but are rapidly developing mobile device technology. It appears likely that undeveloped countries will simply skip the wired Internet and instead jump to wireless technology that includes Internet access. In Africa, for example, one source reports the number of mobile phones grew from 15.6 to 135 million from 2000 to 2005, ninefold growth in five years, while another source reports sevenfold growth from 2000 to 2006.

In Liberia, an ACM study reports 400,000 customers have mobile phones, compared to 6,600 people with wired Internet access. Internet penetration and use are minimal in Liberia, but the mobile sector is vibrant and growing. Even in post-Taliban Afghanistan mobile device use is growing rapidly. In Afghanistan mature adults who may have only used a telephone three or four times in their lifetime are now getting mobile devices. While some countries are using a “phones first, broadband later” model in their infrastructure, many including Uganda, Mongolia, Burkina Faso and Malawi are pressing for district level or village level broadband access. This is opening the door to visual media from sharing personal pictures to viewing movies and TV.

More than just communication or entertainment, mobile device technology is facilitating everything from emergency relief aid to economic development in underdeveloped countries. Mobile devices have helped speed and direct the delivery of emergency relief aid. Many developing countries are counting on new media to fuel growth in their economies. India is well known for promoting customer call centers. An American is as likely as not to converse with an Indian in Bangalore when applying for a credit card or inquiring about a bill. The outsourced call

center industry is a multi-billion dollar enterprise globally. Developing nations are anxious to get a piece of the action. Mobile device technology has the power to turn mud huts into call centers. Mobile devices can also facilitate things such as regional commodities markets. These markets can transform the lives of poor and rural farmers by giving them access to information about market prices for their crops, freeing them from local buyers and enabling them to get the best prices.

This explosive growth of mobile technology is integrating new media into the very fabric of economic life in not only developed but underdeveloped countries. In countries where freedoms are curtailed and human rights are violated, new media are enabling children in many cases to be the ones who are pulling back the curtains and exposing corrupt regimes with words and images. This is integrating new media into the political life of individuals as well. All of this is making new technology not only integral to peoples' lives, but also important to their very survival.

Most of the media described above have a visual component; some are visual at their core. In fact, one of the most powerful economic engines on the Internet is primarily visual: pornography. An estimated 12 percent of all websites are pornographic, with more than 425 million web pages devoted to porn in 2007. This demonstrates the capacity for new media to influence lives for good or for ill. What is beginning to be discovered in the last 25 years is the capacity for new media penetration to also influence lives for Christ.

Media Impact

Visual stories in many respects are replacing print in convincing people of truths and influencing cultural at large. As the everyday politicians know, if you want to garner people's support, tell them a good story and they will follow. Effective educators use stories to hook their students to engage in the classroom. Advertisers use stories to convince potential buyers their brand exudes meaning and creates the image they want.

Visual stories cut to the heart, involving more of the senses than mediums in print. The greatest change perhaps in visual media in recent times is the capacity it now has to penetrate our lives on multiple planes, simultaneously. The impact of media is more pervasive than ever before in history. Young people, in particular, are dialed into multiple media sources throughout the day, from the television to their iPods, digital games, and their cell phones. Media is shaping our worldview and ability to take in information and engage socially. Research shows young people (age 8-18) in the U.S. are spending 6.3 hours a day engaged in media. While the total number of hours of media exposure per day has flat lined, studies show the amount of media exposure is increasing as young people "media multitask."

Much of the content is driven by advertisers and media groups who capitalize on human psychology and take advantage of their audiences to make more money or promote causes far from Christ. Viewers will need to be alerted to media forms which have harmful messages or political or social agendas that can be destructive or exploitive. They need to understand the impact of media on their lives, whether it helps them become more Christ-like or pulls them farther away.

Trends in Visual Media

With the increasing development, availability, and cost-effectiveness of technology, most of the current trends reflect a more common global use of portable, Internet-enabled devices. The key

categories for visual media trends include the youth culture, social media, user-generated content and more personal choice for media content.

The biggest consumers of media today are youth. Youth in the U.S. age 12-17 increased their television viewing by 3 percent in a year (Nielson 2006). Across cultures youth are using visual media to interact, teach and share their experiences with each other.

An area of dramatic growth in the past few years has been in the area of relational social media. Social media is any communications format where users publish content (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_media). Most of this media is Internet and mobile device driven. Social media provides a new way to interact with others. These methods are becoming even more preferred over email. More than 70 percent of Americans age 15-34 (<http://www.frankwbaker.com/mediause.htm>) are using social networks online. The most trafficked social websites include Facebook and MySpace. This demographic is choosing text messaging on their cell phones and computers over live conversations. Also, there is new interest in what is called "virtual community," in which social networks are being created through the website Second Life.

User-generated media content has grown in popularity. The idea was first made popular by YouTube, which gave the ability for someone to upload "homemade" videos to the website for the whole world to view. YouTube became the fifth most popular website in 2006 with more than 100 million videos viewed daily on the website (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/YouTube>). The major television networks and major companies have created advertising campaigns centered on user-generated videos. New websites like Joost.com are hosting network and cable television shows that you can watch on your computer and, through various widgets, users can interact with their friends about the show they are watching.

Christians' use of media continues to grow. According to Barna Research there are a greater number of Christian adults experiencing spiritual growth through media than through a local church. Two out of three adults used at least one form of religious media—radio, television or books—in the past month. Six out of 10 American adults attended a church service in the past month (<http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=116>). Christian parents over the Christmas season purchased media products like CDs, DVDs and video games for their children under 13—even though they didn't feel comfortable with their purchase. The Christians in the United States were likely to spend up to \$1 billion on these products despite their concern over the moral content for children under 18. Also, Christian television continues to draw interest by viewers and today one out of every six adults is spending time on faith-based websites. There is more interest by the younger generation and certain groups of people in these types of websites over watching faith-based television or listening to Christian radio (<http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=184>).

Resources in Visual Media and Story

With the explosion of media saturation and penetration in the past 50 years, a corresponding wave of visual media resources has surfaced. Key categories include media studies (understanding the role and impact of media as well as teaching people to "interpret" media), visual media production, and "storying" resources. A variety of resources are available including university degree programs, organizations and networks, online and published material. A growing number of Christian resources are becoming available.

Media Studies has become a growing academic field as an awareness of the impact of visual media on individuals and cultures has developed. Many major universities now have degree-granting programs. Secular organizations interested in blunting the negative impact of visual media have emerged. Children/Youth and Girls/Women (e.g. www.mediaandwomen.org) are two areas where specific focus has emerged. The website www.understandmedia.com is dedicated to promoting media literacy for a broad spectrum of people. The Pew Charitable Trust and the Kaiser Family Foundation provide free access to research done on the impact of media in the U.S.

Visual Media Production includes making content for film, television and the Internet. There are many degree granting programs in the United States (e.g. USC, University of Florida, New York University). Schools and Institutes such as Full Sail offer specialized programs in media production, design and art.

Storying resources are often included in film and television courses. With the advent of digital media, "digital storytelling" helps ordinary people tell, record and share stories that are meaningful and worthy of being transmitted. The Center for Digital Storytelling (www.storycenter.org) is a unique resource in this field.

Christians have become active in the creation and use of visual media. A limited number of degree-granting programs exist from Christian institutions. These include Biola University, Oral Roberts and Regent College. The Los Angeles Film Studies Center offers a one-semester course through 100 Christian universities. Scores of Christian media production companies exist. The majority of these create content for Christian markets. There are dozens of Christian television networks, though there seems to be a default to the "talking head" instead of crafting well-told stories. The number of Christian film festivals is increasing.

We have yet to uncover significant resources in the realm of visual media impact outside the United States. Also, there was very little discovered in the realm of Christians being intentional about leveraging the power of visual media and story for the sake of the gospel.

Summary

A paradigm shift is underway in the way the world is communicating. Innovative Christians must lead a wave of change in how we connect and communicate with those who have not responded to Christ. The opportunities are astounding. We cannot afford to miss this chance to make Christ known in powerful, visual, relevant ways.

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