

Tools for Telling

By BRIAN YANOFCHICK, M.A.

Some years ago, during a summer in the mid 1960s, I came into possession of *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* by Marshall McLuhan. Although the book was not intended for a kid in his early teens, I found myself fascinated by the ideas it contained. This is the book in which McLuhan introduced the now familiar phrase “the medium is the message.” I recall his descriptions of “hot media,” such as television, which supplied the viewer with a total experience of sight and sound, making the viewer a more passive participant than does “cool media,” such as radio, which leaves it to listeners to supply their own visuals by way of imagination. Think of how we might visualize the action of a baseball game as we listen to a radio sports announcer, or supply in our minds scenes in an episode of “Guy Noir, Private Eye,” a frequent segment on National Public Radio’s “A Prairie Home Companion.”

McLuhan’s insights captured my imagination at an early age and helped me to pay attention to the way people communicate.

Jump ahead now to 2010 and consider the vastly expanded forms of media that engage us, many of them non-existent even a decade ago. The Internet, Facebook, Twitter and text messaging invite us to experience communicating in new ways. Today, via Skype, we can chat with friends around the world for free. Our communication media are cheaper, more diverse and available to almost anyone with access to the Internet. YouTube may turn an unknown person into a worldwide celebrity in a matter of hours.

It is this access that prompted author Thomas Friedman to use the metaphor “the world is flat” to describe the equal opportunities offered to a broad range of people via today’s diverse media options. This metaphor formerly referred to thinking that held back exploration and pursuit of new knowledge. Today it describes the vigorous pursuit of new networks of people around the world.

With so much media at our fingertips, what is the message? It is a question we are answering every day within the ministry of Catholic health care. This special section on communication in

the context of mission offers a variety of reflections. From person-to-person communications, whether telling stories or delivering bad news, to effective uses of PowerPoint and social media, to development of a discernment tool to ensure mission is a part of all our important communications, authors describe the ways our messages shape us and our relationships. We explore how we present ourselves to the communities we serve, to those who seek our services, and even to those who might question our right to serve as we do.

In reading these articles, I am reminded of the closing chapters of the gospels of both St. Mark and St. Matthew. Each gives an account of the final act of Jesus’ earthly ministry before he left his disciples—his command to tell the story of what they had seen and heard during their time with him and to invite others into the community of faith.

This issue of *Health Progress* explores the ways we continue to respond to that command.

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JOURNAL OF THE CATHOLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES

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Reprinted from *Health Progress*, November-December 2010
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