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Information management and delivery of the Bible

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Bible in Mission

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Pauline Hoggarth
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Bill Mitchell
Knud Jørgensen

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INFORMATION MANAGEMENT AND DELIVERY OF THE BIBLE

Paul A Soukup

In the Bible, God definitely works through human means, with all their characteristics and even with all their limitations. From the perspective of human communication, the ideas of ‘delivery systems’ or media for the Bible give only a part of the picture. The larger story describes how God’s word in the Scriptures moves from generation to generation in a variety of forms. And that story (looked at as communication) concerns information management: the discovery, preservation, recall, and expression of information. This case study of the delivery system of the Bible in mission will draw on the media ecology approach to communication study. After introducing that, the essay will examine the idea of information management as it appears in communication in general and in the Bible in particular. Next it will review some transformations in Bible delivery and finally examine some of the consequences.

Media Ecology

Media ecology, as the name suggests, approaches communication as the study of environments: the environments in which communication occurs and the environments created by human communication. The environments described here include both physical ones (books, radios, digital displays, and so on) and cognitive ones. A key media ecology principle holds that all the components of these environments interact, creating complex ecosystems, much as one finds in the biological world, from which the metaphor of media ecology comes. A brief example will serve to clarify the idea: If we add a new communication medium (a smart phone, say) to the communication ecology, it affects all the other parts, much as adding a new frog to a pond will affect all the other life of that pond. In the case of the smart phone, people eventually change the way that they send messages (texting instead of email), make phone calls (more or less frequently, from anywhere), entertain themselves (playing games on the phone), watch television (again, on the phone, from a video on demand service), think about the world, manage their information (online calendars, phone books, and even searches), and so on. More than that, the new technologies affect how people think. Postman notes, ‘Media ecology looks into the matter of

how media of communication affect human perception, understanding, feeling, and value; and how our interaction with media facilitates or impedes our chances of survival.¹ As an approach to communication study, media ecology describes this complex system and tracks how it changes.

An examination of delivery systems shows them as part of an information management system. Classical rhetoric illustrates this since it shaped the patterns of knowledge and communication that prevail in the West. Ancient rhetoric described not merely how to deliver a speech, but a wider practice that defined education and knowledge. Developed in a predominantly oral culture, rhetoric describes practices that evolved to help cultures preserve those things essential to their identity and survival. Without the technology of writing, people had to manage key cultural information (how to grow or find food, how to make weapons or build ships, religious practices, key points of history, and so on) through memory, recitation, and communal participation. These activities of rhetoric include finding arguments and discovering knowledge; the presentation of knowledge in ways that the hearers could understand; the arrangement of knowledge in pleasing and memorable ways; techniques to recall what the speaker had learned; and the actual performance and delivery of the message. From a media ecology perspective these describe a way of thinking, learning and communicating based on the delivery system. Though not discussing the evolution of rhetoric in these terms, Ong calls attention to its power of organization as classical rhetoric shaped and defined education and culture until and beyond the Renaissance.²

In his better known work on orality and literacy,³ Ong outlines some of the ways that a proto-rhetoric worked in oral cultures to manage key information: the use of ‘heavy’ characters to anchor ideas, the use of proverbs to frame wisdom, the use of repetition to aid memory, the use of narrative and family relationships to organize information, and so on. Kelber⁴ shows how some of these practices apply in the Scriptures as well.

¹ Neil Postman. ‘The reformed English curriculum’, in Alvin C. Eurich (ed), *High School 1980: The Shape of the Future in American Secondary Education* (New York: Pitman, 1970), 160-168. (Quoted in ‘What is media ecology’ (Neil Postman), retrieved December 24, 2012 from http://www.media-ecology.org/media_ecology/index.html),

² Walter J. Ong, *Ramus: Method, and the Decay of Dialogue; From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), 53-91.

³ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and literacy: The technologizing of the word* (New York and London: Methuen, 1982).

⁴ Werner H. Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press. Rpt. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997); Werner H. Kelber, ‘The Work of Walter Ong and Biblical Scholarship’, in Sara van

The Hebrew culture and the early Christians had to manage religious information; both employed the cultural tools that fit into the broad patterns described above, though the specific oral tools varied. Less remarked, but present in most cultures, is the use of images, architecture, or other aides-memoire to supplement or prompt oral recall. The patterns form an ecology of information storage, education, communication and delivery systems that find a place in the spread of the Bible.

Transforming Memory and Delivery

Four of the modes of the Bible, and the transformations from one to another, illustrate the link between the Bible itself, systems of preservation, delivery, and other aspects of communication. As a collection of religious materials, the Bible begins in a combination of oral and written forms (as well as hybrid forms like dictation in which the speaker creates an oral discourse for writing). The oral forms existed in an ecology of memory, live performance, communal interaction, and variation with remarkable consistency, as Dunn⁵ points out. As such, the Bible existed only in what Dunn terms 'oral memory', that is, in performance or in communal recollection. The delivery of the oral Bible was in many ways the Bible. Such an ecology includes the context of worship, interpretation, homiletics, discussion, and the various roles within the community taken on by those who recall the material or apply it. The wisdom of the wise, for example, consists in knowing which proverb to apply in a given situation.⁶ The faith of the community comes by hearing.

The first transformation, from oral discourse to writing, actually creates the Bible, as the sacred materials become *biblia*, 'the writings' or 'the books'. The earliest forms consisted of scrolls of papyrus or parchment. Because of their limited capacity, their cost, and the limited number of those who could read them, the scrolls did not replace the oral techniques, but added elements to the information management of ancient cultures. Later, people used the codex as a storage format. It had greater information storage capacity than a scroll and allowed easier access to material (a reader could page through it quickly). In a smaller format than a scroll, the codex gained in portability as well.⁷ In either format, writing supplemented memory and enabled the recorded words to travel and to move through time separated from the oral memory. As items separable from a

den Berg and Thomas M. Walsh (eds), *Language, Culture, and Identity: The Legacy of Walter J. Ong, S. J.* (New York: Hampton Press, Inc., 2011), 49-67.

⁵ James D. G. Dunn, 'Jesus in Oral Memory: The Initial Stages of the Jesus tradition', in Dorothy Donnelly (ed), *Jesus: A Colloquium in the Holy Land* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 84-145.

⁶ Ong, *Orality*, 35.

⁷ Timothy Beal, *The Rise and Fall of the Bible: The Unexpected History of an Accidental Book* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), 113-116.

community, these writings often required translation, especially as they found their way to other cultures.

Over time, an ecology of a text developed: texts required papyri or parchment, inks, and the skilled workers to prepare them. Texts required scribes to record oral performance or dictation, copyists to reproduce them, and readers who mastered the interpretation of writing. These in turn required norms of writing and schools to teach the norms to students. Texts created a market of sellers and traders. Eventually, texts also acquired decoration – whether to help a reader find a page or to make the text more valuable, even to those who could not read.⁸ Within this ecology of the text, the Bible existed as a book among books, for the same industry that created, decorated, sold and read the Bible also did the same for Greek and Latin writings of all sorts. The ecology took centuries to develop, as did the settling of the canon – the selection of writings that the Christian church accepted.⁹ As in any ecosystem, the participating groups affected each other: the information management of the Bible became part of the information management of classical culture just as the latter informed the Bible. As writing became normative in cultures, it changed aspects of information management. People no longer depended on rhetoric for finding information or recalling it. Expression became more concise; formal logic increased in importance over narrative.¹⁰ Writing implied a fixity not just of form but of content; writing also lent importance to spatial arrangement, to the appearance of the page and the placement of information on each page. And writing intensified particular kinds of linear thinking, words or concepts following one another on a page.¹¹

The next significant transformation in the information management of the Bible had less to do with information storage (writing) than with book production (automation). Printing automated the production of books and thus increased the reach of the book and more or less amplified each of the characteristics of writing. Printing lowered the cost of books, which led to an increased production. The increased production and availability of books led to a rise in literacy along with the greater development of a book trade and a wider variety of available reading materials. Among other things, that wider set of materials included ancient texts, biblical editions and contemporary writings. The ancient texts honed the language skills of translators; the biblical editions improved the quality of the works available; and the contemporary writings fostered a desire to read the

⁸ Carl Nordenfalk, *Book Illumination: Early Middle Ages* (Geneva: Editions d'Art Albert Skira SA, 1995 [1957]), 7.

⁹ Beal, *Rise*, 106-07.

¹⁰ Ong, *Orality*, 103ff.

¹¹ Shane Hipps, *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture: How Media Shapes Faith, the Gospel, and Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 58ff.

Bible.¹² Booksellers and church reformers in the early days of print produced vernacular language editions of the Bible, but also commentaries and annotated editions, combining interpretation with the text of the Bible.¹³

The printed page also contributed to the ecology of information management. With identical copies, printers and editors introduced reference systems – chapter and verse and pagination, but also tables of contents and indices. Rather than trusting in memory, people referred to a printed location. In the larger scheme of things, the French educational reformer Peter Ramus used the print system to hasten the reconfiguration that classical rhetoric had begun several centuries earlier.¹⁴ In the centuries after printing and Ramus, the information management system of the West underwent dramatic changes: books replaced memory systems; alphabetical order replaced rhetorical arrangement; the essay replaced the disputation; abstract analysis supplemented narrative; scientific empiricism grew up alongside of traditional learning; the Bible became an object of scientific study.¹⁵ While each of these affects the Bible – from the publication of recovered manuscripts to the tradition of higher criticism – the emergence of a book trade in the Bible had an equally powerful impact, both benefitting from and fuelling the growth of churches. Bible publishing emerged in the 16th and 17th centuries along with expanded efforts in translation into European languages.¹⁶ But a more distant part of the ecosystem of the West coincided with the advent of printing: the voyages of discovery that put Western Europe into contact with Asia, Africa, and the Western Hemisphere. For the Christian missionary movement, the printed Bible took on huge significance, with missionaries carrying and distributing copies and collaborating with indigenous peoples to translate the Bible.¹⁷

The third transformation in information management that affected the Bible began only in the last century: the move into what people call ‘new media’. Depending on how one draws the line, such new media could include visual media like film and television, expanded aural media like

¹² Paul A. Soukup, ‘The King James Version: A Media Ecology Analysis’, paper presented to the 46th Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, San Francisco, CA, 2011.

¹³ Beal, *Rise*, 120-31.

¹⁴ Ong, *Ramus*, 171ff.

¹⁵ Ong, *Ramus*, 225ff; Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

¹⁶ Soukup, *King James*.

¹⁷ Philip Noss (ed), *A History of Bible Translation* (Manchester, UK: St. Jerome/Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2007); John David K. Ekem, *Early Scriptures of the Gold Coast (Ghana)* (Manchester, UK: St. Jerome/Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2011).

radio and recording technologies, and digital media including electronic storage and distribution systems. All of them have added to the ways that people understand, recall, and manipulate knowledge. The aural media, for example, returned in some ways to the older rhetorical tradition, recalling ways that people processed information orally, even though these media retain many of the characteristics learned from writing and print (a phenomenon that Ong terms ‘secondary orality’¹⁸). Alongside these, the visual media present information in a seemingly more naturalistic way, in the images and sounds of daily life. In these media in particular, the information storage, presentation, and retrieval take on a predominantly narrative form. That form spills over into gaming, for example, where the viewer becomes a participant in an artificial world that presents and manages knowledge in predictable ways. Supported by a massive industry of creative artists and writers, production companies, delivery networks, sales and marketing groups, schools and training facilities, data warehouses, and much more, the new media have their own ecology within the larger communication ecology. The sheer volume of material overwhelms any given user and many indexing systems. However, older information patterns have not disappeared: the new media take their place alongside books and writing, art, music, oral discourse, and storytelling and incorporate them in new ways. To borrow the biological metaphor, this newer ecosystem involves an evolution of the older ones: it retains some aspects, transforms others, and leaves some behind.

This world affects the Bible as well. Churches, artists, and translators have brought the Bible into the new media, beginning with filmmakers in the earliest days of film¹⁹ and continuing to contemporary amateur YouTube Bible videos. People have recorded audio Bibles, drawn animated Bibles, created graphic novel versions, coded online Bibles for smart phones and tablet computers, and even created Bible games. Bible publishers continue to print Bibles, but since the overall ecosystem has changed, people look to the newer formats in which they already receive other information. In some ways the oral tradition of the Bible has evolved and re-emerged into these new media.

Consequences of a Changing Ecology

As this summary suggests, each change in the communication environment affects the Bible, its delivery and distribution, but also people’s experience of the Bible, their use of the Bible, their knowledge of the Bible, their

¹⁸ Walter J. Ong, ‘The Literate Orality of Popular Culture Today’, in Walter J. Ong, *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1971), 284-303).

¹⁹ Terry Lindvall, ‘Religion and Film: Part I: History and Criticism’, *Communication Research Trends*, 23:4 (December 2004), 1-44.

understanding of the Bible, their recall of the Bible, and so on. In the early centuries of Christianity, with written scrolls and codices, perhaps only 10% of the population could read. Most experienced the Bible by hearing, whether during worship or in performances, or by Bible stories illustrated in mosaics, sculpture, or art. People knew the Bible not as a book but as narratives of Jesus, as letters from St. Paul, as recited passages from the prophets, psalms, or other parts of the Hebrew Bible. Most people never saw the Bible as a book and, for the most part, a Bible in today's terms – as a collection of Old and New Testament books – did not exist²⁰: 'book' technology could not publish something of the size of today's Bible, nor could groups afford the copies. People lived the Bible in sermons, stories, representations, and oral memory. The delivery was the narrative.

As literacy spread, those who could read (often monks and nuns) produced manuscript books. Those who could not read began to see a Bible: books highly decorated with illustrations and adorned with precious inks, metals, and jewels and displayed in churches. The available communication technology focused on showing the value of the Bible, but almost as an icon rather than something for reading. Churches became 'Bibles in stone'²¹ where Christians saw biblical narratives rather than read them. Literacy demanded too much time and too much education and too many copies – all things beyond what medieval people could afford. Only the advent of printing changed the situation enough for people to afford books, learn to read, have a desire to read. Now people could hold a Bible, own a Bible, read a Bible. The very experience of the Bible changed. The fixity of print – every page in each edition identical, each word locked into place – helped make the Bible something unchanging, something that stayed the same not as oral memory but as words that one could check on a page. Such a Bible lived less in the community's preaching and discussion and more on the page, with fixed notes and interpretations and often separate from a community. The delivery of the Bible became the delivery or shipping of a book.

These few observations highlight some aspects of the ecology of the Bible:

- From the advent of writing to our own day, the Bible depends increasingly on technology: first the technology of writing and paper making, then the technology of printing, and now the various digital technologies. Without technology, the Bible as we know it would not exist.
- The technologized Bible exists separately from a community. Those who produce the Bible as an artefact may never know those who read or study it. And, beginning with private reading, the reader needs silence and a certain measure of isolation. The printed Bible

²⁰ Beal, *Rise*, 114.

²¹ Barr Ferree, 'Bibles in Stone', *New England Magazine*, 24:3 (1898), 162-177.

and even the YouTube Bible provide a solitary experience. In an ecological analysis such an experience correlates with shifting understandings of the Church and a shifting sense of what constitutes the Bible. What people ‘deliver’ when they deliver the Bible has changed over the years.

- New forms of the Bible, beginning with printed books, increased the distribution of the Bible, with more people having Bibles. But the Bible, so widely distributed, also became a commodity in the publishing industry, complete with marketing, branding, and other aspects inherited from the wider communication context.
- The very multiplicity of forms and marketing of the Bible led to a loss of ‘aura’.²² The more familiar the form – plainly bound, widely available, a click away, given away as a portion, not so dissimilar from other mediated content – the less special. God’s word appears like so many other elements in the communication ecosystem.

The changing information management systems, as manifest in communication media and practices, highlight changes in the ways in which people experience the Bible. In the contemporary world, we tend to think of Bible delivery or distribution, ideas based on the practices of the printing press. Such practices inadvertently separate the word of God from oral practices, making it appear as a ‘thing’ rather than as a living word. (The same thinking separated sender, message, medium, and receiver in early communication study.) Even though new media challenge this object-centred way of thinking, people still unconsciously think of ‘something’ digital, for example, rather than an experience created in the media. What may be a contemporary version of oral memory becomes a ‘digital thing’.

As believers, we remain confident that the word of God remains the word of God, but the changing information management and communication systems challenge us to let the word of God encounter our world in its freedom.

²²Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, in *Illuminations* (trans. Harry Zohn; ed. Hannah Arendt; New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 217–51.