

Media watchdog: Pope takes wary approach to communications explosion

VATICAN CITY - Toward the end of his encyclical "Charity in Truth," Pope Benedict XVI included a brief but strongly worded analysis about the "increasingly pervasive presence" of modern media and their power to serve good or immoral interests.

The two pages on communications were barely noticed in an encyclical that focused on economic issues, but they underscored the pope's cautionary and critical approach to today's media revolution.

In particular, the pope zeroed in on the popular assumption in the West that the penetration of contemporary media in the developing world will inevitably bring enlightenment and progress.

"Just because social communications increase the possibilities of interconnection and the dissemination of ideas, it does not follow that they promote freedom or internationalize development and democracy for all," the pope wrote.

The pope's critique made several important points:

- The mass media are not morally "neutral." They are often subordinated to "economic interests intent on dominating the market" and to attempts to "impose cultural models that serve ideological and political agendas," he said.
- The media have a huge role in shaping attitudes, a role that has been amplified by globalization. That requires careful reflection on their influence, especially when it comes to questions of ethics and the "solidarity" dimension of development, he said.
- Media have a civilizing effect when they are "geared toward a vision of the person and the common good that reflects truly universal values." That means they need to focus on promoting human dignity, be "inspired by charity and placed at the service of truth," he said.

Inspired by charity? That may sound overly idealistic to those familiar with some of the more popular talk-radio shows or blogs these days.

Archbishop Claudio Celli, president of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, said recently that the pope is not naive about what's out there.

"He knows perfectly well what's circulating on the great networks of information. That's why he says we need to reflect on the distribution of words and images that are degrading to the human person, and put a halt to whatever fuels hatred and intolerance, or whatever wounds the beauty and intimacy of human sexuality," the archbishop said.

Archbishop Celli, who has pioneered some of the Vatican's new media initiatives, said that while the pope wants to affirm the opportunities of the media explosion he will voice concern when needed. One example is the concept of friendship: The pope believes it's an important element of the digital age, but risks being trivialized.

"It would be sad if our desire to sustain and develop online friendships were to be at the cost of our availability to engage with our families, our neighbors and those we meet in the daily reality of our places of work, education and recreation," the pope wrote in his annual message to communicators earlier this year.

Pope Benedict faces a challenging task when it comes to communications. The 82-year-old pontiff is definitely old school, preferring books to videos and expressing his most important ideas in documents that he writes out longhand.

At the same time, his aides have gone to great lengths to portray the pope as a friend of new media, featuring him in text messages, YouTube videos and podcasts. Yet Pope Benedict's teaching style is not easily reduced to sound bites or video clips. Even his off-the-cuff remarks come across as carefully reasoned.

Moreover, the pope has found that his core message – the importance of faith in God and the power of the Gospel to change lives – often fails to make the news ticker. Media interest perks up when there's a Vatican controversy, but not when the pope talks about the need for saints in modern society.

Even the pope's long-awaited encyclical on economic justice, timed for release as the

world's leaders were meeting to tackle the global financial crisis, was bumped off network newscasts and relegated to the inside pages of newspapers by an event too big to ignore: the massive memorial service the same day for Michael Jackson.

It's doubtful any of this surprises Pope Benedict. Several years ago, he commented on the church's relationship with the media in his book "Salt of the Earth."

"The convictions and modes of behavior that hold the church together are located at a deeper level than the forms of expression and behavioral patterns that are imposed on us by the mass media," he said.

That's no sound bite, either, but it reflects the pope's caution against presuming that today's media culture is on the church's wavelength. It also implies that the media themselves should be a major target of modern evangelization.