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Learning to Speak the Language of Influence

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Learning to Speak the Language of Influence

Abstract

"There's nothing wrong with media that entertains and delights. We need that. But prophetic media takes it a step further and dares ask an audience hard questions and helps us wonder about the state of things on earth today."

Posting about the new literacy of image from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/learning-to-speak-the-language-of-influence/>

Keywords

In All Things, social influence, storytelling, visual communication

Disciplines

Christianity | Film and Media Studies

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

Learning to Speak the Language of Influence

▫ inallthings.org/learning-to-speak-the-language-of-influence/

Mark Volkers

There are three interesting things going on in culture today and they all involve media transitions.

First: Until recently, most people both found and created their identity through what they produced. “He makes excellent oak barrels.” “Her hindeloopen painting is exquisite.” Today, many are defined by what they consume. That became clear to me when a photo was published a few years ago in national newspapers showing a young man coming out of an Apple store, holding one of the first iPhones as he walked — like a conquering hero —

between rows of adoring and cheering people who were all waiting to purchase the exact same thing and become unique replicas of one another with their purchases. Others “create” their identity by aligning with brands, TV shows, or movies (*Star Wars*, anyone?) The first transition involves rooting our identity and uniqueness not in what we produce, but in what we consume.

The second transition, as it regards media, is hugely important and moves in the opposite direction of the first. Those of us who were around in the 1980s and earlier know that there was a small contingent of storytellers, and a massive army of consumers of those stories. To be a storyteller for the masses in that era required tools and budgets only a few could afford. Making a movie or television show was prohibitive, requiring expensive gear, a small army of minions to get the job done, and distribution deals that cost millions. To write and publish a book or album required talent, connections, and distribution that few possessed. As a result, a few told stories to the masses while the rest consumed those stories.

Today, everything is reversed. Anyone with a decent cellphone camera and connection to the internet *can be* a storyteller. Anyone who wants to start a blog *can be* a writer on the world stage. Anyone with a bit of musical talent and a knack for marketing themselves *can be* heard online around the world. It’s been a remarkable and exciting transition, one that should be embraced.

Many do embrace this shift and not only create new products, but once again find their identity in what they create, rather than what they produce. For proof, witness the explosion of blogs, YouTube videos, independent films, and excellent documentaries. The perfect storm of new tools and new storytellers leads us to our third transition: We have moved from an age of print literacy to the age of the visual image, leading our culture to a whole new literacy — learning to read images.

The purists among us may decry this shift in literacy from the printed page to the moving image, but the shift has already happened. The body of believers has been fairly slow to embrace this powerful new language of communication and as such, the message of Redemption has not saturated the public consciousness. We can watch primetime TV or go to a movie and browse YouTube and see every alternative lifestyle available today, worldviews on display, and ISIS recruiting pieces, but not a lot of good, quality content that gives nuanced road signs pointing people to Truth, in ways that people actually want to watch.

If we want to build a culture of creative living and thinking, we need to embrace the new literacy with gusto and join the global discussion. Here are a few things we can do:

1. Teach our youth to read and write. Obviously. But, we also need to teach them the new literacy of the image. It is quickly becoming the de facto language of the world.¹
2. Once our youth understand the new language of media, help them once again find identity in what they create, rather than what they consume. A great way to do that is through the new language and tools of storytelling. Right now, anyone can be a storyteller, but only some will be good storytellers.
3. Teach our good storytellers to create prophetic media.

There's nothing wrong with media that entertains and delights. We need that. But prophetic media takes it a step further and dares ask an audience hard questions and helps us wonder about the state of things on earth today. While we're laughing about a character or experiencing the wonder of love through a story, we're also questioning some injustice, like malaria deaths, sex trafficking, or hunger in America.

Dissatisfaction with the status quo² is something Christians bring to the discussion in the public square. We need to learn how to do it with love, gentleness, and a finesse that can only happen when we truly understand the new language of communication. Building a culture that truly values God-pleasing creative living and thinking requires changing hearts. Right now, media is the language of influence.

Footnotes

1. Apkon, Stephen. *The Age of the Image: Redefining Literacy in a World of Screens*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013. 13. Print. The author, in discussing new technology and the changing face of literacy, says, "Soon it will be as unfathomable not to know how to make a video as it is not to know how to send an email." ↩
2. Woods, Robert H., and Paul D. Patton. *Prophetically Incorrect: A Christian Introduction to Media Criticism*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010. 18. "Christian media must address a wide range of important cultural issues including materialism, consumerism, self-deification, gluttony, ethnic stereotypes in films, sexism in soap operas, and violence in sports, and not focus solely on individual, isolated instances of morally objectionable content." ↩