

Using New Media to Make Disciples

by JD

Sitting in a university lecture, a young student from the Arab world reads her research paper out to the class. The lecturer shows some reserve when he discovers that her primary source of information is a free encyclopaedia on the Internet, open for any surfer to review and adapt. The student's methods reflect the new style of interactive learning developing across the Arab world. Converging media are permeating society and shaping perceptions in many regions. This global forum leads us to ask just how significant digital technology will prove to be in reaching the current generation of Muslims of the Arab world with the Gospel. Should we be investing resources in using channels such as the Internet and mobile phone to communicate our message? This brief article examines some of the pros and cons of new technology from a missiological perspective and moves towards an advocacy of using new media for evangelism and discipleship in the Arab world.

By all means

A major reservation often aired is that contemporary media channels are the domain of the elite and privileged in Arab society. It is thought that to concentrate media efforts on Internet broadcasting would severely restrict our audience. This may have been the case five or ten years ago, but the advent of converging media and, in particular, the introduction of the mobile phone, is changing the face of communications in the Arab world. A recent article in *The Gulf Times* states that mobile phone use in the Arab world surged by 70% in 2005. The fastest growing markets are in Yemen and Sudan. North Africa (excluding Egypt) has the second highest penetration with a growth rate of 86%.¹

Increased access to new media is having a significant impact on ministry. In the last twelve months, websites have generated over 4000 electronic mail responses to our AWM *Media* centres from all over the world, including countries as difficult to reach as Mauritania, Saudi Arabia and Libya. It is clear that we cannot ignore such widespread opportunities. In the eighteenth century, pioneer missionary William Carey saw the invention of the mariner's compass as a divine providence to enable men and women to travel as never before with the Gospel². Can we see the creation of the Internet, in spite of all its abuses, as an act of providence? Carey pointed out in his *Enquiry* that the fact that slave-traders and unethical merchants had used navigational tools to exploit others should spur Christians on to show compassion and use all appropriate means to make disciples of all nations³.

Strategic youth

Another premise for employing modern media to proclaim the Gospel and teach new believers is that there is a predominance of young people in the Arab world. The proportion of people under 25 is as high as 65% in some areas. This is a generation that is 'extremely eager to plug into the world'⁴. A review of the emails and letters received at our AWM *Media* centres reflects this trend towards a younger audience. The Scriptures provide us with plenty of examples of people whom God used greatly while they were still young. Joseph was only seventeen when he was sold into slavery, yet he went on to become the acting head of Potiphar's household. Josiah was nineteen when he began to organise the restoration of true worship and David was regarded as just a boy, but he was the only one brave enough to

¹ 'Mobile phone use by Arabs up 70% in '05', *The Gulf Times*, 30 July 2006.

² Daniel Webber, *William Carey and The Missionary Vision*, Banner of Truth, 2005, 88.

³ *Ibid*, 108.

⁴ S. Kanafani, 'Trendy Arab youth TV "with an edge" hits airwaves', *The Daily Star* online, <http://www3.start.com/arab/entertainment/zentv.html>.

challenge Goliath and defend God's Name. Below is an extract from a recent email sent to our Arabic website for youth, www.shabiba.net. The girl who wrote it is fourteen years old.

I want to tell you I have dedicated my life to Christ as a personal Saviour. I have many questions I wish you could answer, but please do not disregard me because of my age. Please answer me.

If we are to be like David who 'served God's purpose in his own generation'⁵, we need to engage with new technologies to communicate our message.

New media as the public square

Perhaps one of the greatest reservations expressed about new technologies is that they can impede relationships and meaningful communication. Yet, the context of new media in the Middle East has been described as 'an expanding public sphere with unprecedented opportunities for participation, a widening, more diverse public ... and spaces for new interpretations and new interpreters'⁶. The pull towards digital convergence of audio-visual media has created an area in cyberspace of decentralized interactive communication. In other words, through interactive channels such as email, mobile media and Internet chat rooms, everyone can have their say. There is a rapidly widening open door for public debate and exchange. Not only should we be explaining God's word in a clear, theologically accurate and relevant way in this new public square, but we also have opportunity to engage people in dialogue and personally interact with them. Ultimately, our aim is to lead them into a relationship with Christ and with other believers. It is already possible to link correspondents with someone in their own area so that they can do interactive online Bible study together. The mobile phone is an easy and relatively safe way to put people in touch, and sending out media materials can contribute to meeting the diverse needs of those who write to us.

So, how significant will new media be in reaching the Arab world with the Gospel? Of course none of us can foresee the future, but the opportunity to be seen and heard is already there. Let us believe God to use us to touch today's connected generation of the Arab world with the grace and truth of Jesus Christ.

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⁵ Acts 13:36

⁶ J.W. Anderson, 'Technology, Media, and the Next Generation in the Middle East'. Paper delivered at the Middle East Institute, Columbia University, 28 September 1999.