

LSI and the Media: Obstacles and Opportunities

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Abstract

This year our LSI began an ongoing partnership with Twin Cities Public Television (TPT) with the filming of one of our events for broadcast. Our LSI was engaged in reading and discussing Dr. David Sloan Wilson's book *Darwin's Cathedral*. We invited TPT to film the final discussion between Wilson and members of the LSI and Wilson's public presentation.

This experience gave us several insights into working with the media, and raised some larger questions. Media exposure is, of course, an opportunity to bring the science and religion dialogue to a much larger audience; we expect our first show to reach 3000-5000 households. Interestingly enough, members of the production crew became interested as they worked on the show and asked for our extra copies of *Darwin's Cathedral*, so our outreach was to the crew as well. Shows such as this also give exposure to the institution sponsoring the LSI, and this can be used as a means to leverage funds and institutional support for ongoing LSI activities. Deans and presidents like this sort of thing.

On the other hand, there are drawbacks to television involvement in LSI activities, drawbacks that seem to be, in part, inherent in the nature of the medium. Several of our LSI members were unhappy with aspects of our collaborative event. LSI discussions, at their best, are deep, sometimes technical, and involve specialized knowledge in at least two fields. Television wants something accessible to the common viewer—our discussion had to be simplified. LSI discussions, at their best, involve multiple persons, yet television producers are happiest with a limited number of people on the set—some got left out, formats had to be altered. Finally, LSI discussions are about ideas, while television looks for visuals—did we substitute flash for substance?

In this paper I will explore alternative formats that neither compromise the integrity of the LSI nor fail to produce an engaging show. I hope to suggest how to overcome some of the obstacles above, and to solicit suggestions for innovative formats that would present the excitement of LSI dialogue to a larger audience.

Biography

Noreen Herzfeld is Professor of Computer Science at Saint John's University, Collegeville MN, where she is also the director of the Senior Ethics program. Noreen holds a doctorate in Christian Spirituality from the Graduate Theological Institute in Berkeley, California. She also holds advanced degrees in Mathematics and Computer Science from Penn State University. Her primary research interest is in science and religion.

She is the author of "In Our Image: Artificial Intelligence and the Human Spirit" (Fortress, 2002) which examines the question of what it means for one being to be in the image of another. She has written numerous papers for journals and professional conferences including: "Creating in Our Own Image: Artificial Intelligence and the

Image of God" (Zygon, June 2002); "Wall or Window: The Prospects for Spiritual Experience in Cyberspace" (CTNS Bulletin, Fall 2002); "Cybernetic Immortality vs. Christian Resurrection" (in Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments, Eerdmans, 2002); "Co-creator or co-creator? Two Interpretations of the Imago Dei and their Implications for Artificial Intelligence," (Studies in Science and Theology, Fall 2003) and "A Letter From the Balkans: The Prospects for Religious Reconciliation in Bosnia" (The Christian Century, July 2003).

She teaches undergraduate computer science courses in artificial intelligence, computer theory, ethics, and senior research. She also teaches "Spiritual Traditions of Islam" and "Religion and Conflict" for the School of Theology and undergraduate department of Theology at St. John's. In her spare time, Noreen is a certified wine judge with the American Wine Society, and sings in the Colledgeville Consort, a nine voice early music group that has just made its first CD.

How can we LSI's harness the power of television to bring the science and religion dialogue to others? According to Marshal McLuhan, "television is teaching all the time. It does more educating than the schools and all the institutions of higher learning." Surely we should be using this educational power. On the other hand, McLuhan also said "the medium is the message." Do we run the risk of distorting or diluting the science and religion dialogue when we present it through the medium of television? Television has historically had a difficult time presenting science to the public. Television has historically had a difficult time presenting religion to the public. So what kind of partner is television for science and religion?

This year our LSI began an ongoing partnership with Twin Cities Public Television (TPT) with the filming of one of our events for broadcast. Our LSI was engaged in reading and discussing Dr. David Sloan Wilson's book *Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society*. We invited public television to film the final discussion between Wilson and members of the LSI, Wilson's public presentation, and a personal interview.

This experience gave us some insights into working with the media, and raised some larger questions. Media exposure is, of course, an opportunity to bring the science and religion dialogue to a much larger audience; our show reached 3000-4000 households. But the very process of filming LSI activities changed them. In this paper, I will briefly discuss the potential opportunities and a few obstacles to successfully presenting the LSI experience of science and religion dialogue on television. In sum, I believe television

can be used successfully by our groups, but that we must exercise care in choosing what to present and how it is filmed and produced.

Opportunities

Media exposure brings the science and religion dialogue to a much wider audience than the usual activities of an LSI. Each time we bring a speaker to campus we reach an audience of about 120 with a public lecture, another 50 or 60 students through classroom visits, and about 20-25 LSI members who engage the speaker in more extensive discussion. In other words, approximately 200 people interact with the speaker at various levels.

TPT estimated that *Darwin's Cathedral* drew an audience of from 3000 to 4000 statewide. This audience included people who live in more isolated portions of the state; it also included many elderly, who find it difficult to come out for a public lecture at night. After the broadcast I received calls from a varied assortment of people who saw the show and who had not previously shown interest in science and religion.

This widening of audience is not only spatial but also temporal; the tape is a part of a series that will be rebroadcast at a later date. It is also part of our library collection. The high quality of editing and filming makes continued classroom use far more likely than the usual taped lecture. Tapes such as this could also be shared among LSIs. This could be of particular interest to LSIs abroad, where the cost of inviting a given speaker might be prohibitive.

Our outreach was not limited to those watching the show. Interestingly enough, members of the crew became interested in the topic as they worked on the production and editing and asked for our extra copies of Wilson's book so that they could learn more. One can hope that the very act of producing a show on science and religion educates the public television staff, and could have long-range effects on their approach to religion and science issues in the future.

Shows such as this also give exposure to the institution sponsoring the LSI, and this can be used as a means to leverage funds for ongoing activities. At this point I can only say that the president of St. John's University and the abbot of St. John's Abbey were both quite pleased with the production. Our institutional advancement office has several copies of the tape and has promised to share them with potential donors.

Obstacles

There are drawbacks to the involvement of television in LSI activities that are inherent in the medium itself. I will focus here on two areas that suffered from this involvement: depth and inclusivity.

Depth

When you put science and religion together you have a discussion that involves technical or specialized knowledge in at least two fields. Not a good recipe for your typical television show. The more technical aspects of Wilson's presentation and of our discussion were edited out. While both remain coherent, the resulting discussion is really

only a taste of Wilson's ideas on evolution and religion. It also only hints at the richness of the usual LSI discussion, one that, on our campus, brings together experts in a variety of disciplines. While we hope that our production will lead interested viewers to seek out Wilson's book, we could not present the more technical side of his work.

Lack of depth is of course, always a problem with the media. I have found, when being interviewed on my specialty, religious issues and computer technology, that reporters are interested primarily in sound bites about flashy things like robots or the remote prospects of artificial intelligence. When you mention issues involving regular computer use interest flags. Mention theologians like Karl Barth or Reinhold Niebuhr and eyes glaze over. Media coverage seeks the sensational while all too often remaining superficial. An hour long program on public television gives much more scope than the sound bite, but still can barely scratch the surface.

Inclusivity

One of the remarkable things about our LSI has been its attraction of a wide variety of participants. Our group has involved faculty members from eleven different departments, as well as students and monks. LSI discussions, at their best, involve a lot of people. Our discussions have typically included from 12 to 20 persons. But this is far too large a number for television. The technical needs of the production, including the need for all speakers to be miked and the limitations inherent in creating a pleasant visual setting meant we had to limit the size of the group that could participate in our filmed discussion.

In the end, very little of this discussion made it to the final tape. A freewheeling discussion is too chaotic on film, while a question and answer format between a speaker and a group can be remarkably stilted. The personal interview with Wilson was much more coherent and compelling than the group discussion.

Conclusion

Will we continue to work with TPT in producing future shows? Yes, we will, for the opportunities outweigh the obstacles. Most of our LSI members found the experience of producing *Darwin's Cathedral* an interesting one in and of itself. I was well aware, however, of how much the production limited our opportunities to engage with Wilson and to enter into challenging and fruitful discussion. The next time, I'll be sure to schedule a separate LSI discussion away from the distractions of mikes and cameras.

We are also considering exploring alternative formats. One such would be to focus a program on a person in science and religion, rather than on an event such as a public talk. Such a program would center on an interview, giving one scholar time to explain his or her passion within the science and religion field as well as his or her understanding of the field itself. Shots from a public lecture or classroom teaching would provide visual variety, but the focus itself would remain on the person and one aspect of his or her thought.

If we are to have a voice in the challenges, both scientific and religious, that face our society we need to reach as many eyes and ears as possible. We are a nation of

television watchers; we cannot afford not to use this medium. But we must be careful in so doing that the medium does not become the message, but delivers our message, that the ideas and methods of science and religion need not be in conflict but can enrich each other in innumerable ways.