Wonderful Invention!

Ira Wagman

Carleton University, ira.wagman@carleton.ca

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On September 8, 1957, the Roman Catholic Church published the papal encyclical on motion pictures, radio, and television. The title, *Miranda Prorsus*, is a Latin term meaning both "absolutely remarkable" and "remarkable advance" in English. These different connotations coalesced around powerful media technologies in the encyclical's opening phrase "Miranda prorsus technicae artis inventa."[1] The encyclical outlined Pope Pius VII's position on cinema, radio, television, and the press, and it provided advice for clergy, administrators, and laity on how best to approach these powerful media technologies. Since encyclicals provide papal guidance on matters of public concern, this one also represented an attempt by the Catholic Church to consider media as sites through which to comprehend broader social and spiritual problems. With that twin purpose in mind, *Miranda Prorsus* asks: Are media technologies threats to moral virtue, or can they be deployed as tools for eternal salvation?

In what follows I suggest that *Miranda Prorsus* can draw our attention to a few different lines of argument we might explore in accounting for the history of media studies. First, it offers us the occasion to consider how knowledge about media travels within communities that exist outside the academy. At the risk of sounding flippant, I also want to say that it draws our attention to the fact that "media studies" is something different organizations do all the time. The more we recognize this fact, the better equipped we could be to appreciate the pathways of exchange, circulation, imitation, and incorporation that exist between academic and non-expert social institutions. Second, in conceptualizing media both as a contemporary concern and one grounded within the ambit of theological doctrine, *Miranda Prorsus* also asks us to consider the histories of different styles of reasoning about media. To put it a different way, then, I believe that

[1] Pius VII, *Miranda Prorsus*, Encyclical Letter, September 8, 1957, https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_08091957_miranda-prorsus.html (last accessed September 19, 2021). The opening phrase translates to "remarkable technological inventions."

Miranda Prorsus can be read as an *argument about media* as much as it constitutes a set of instructions for other people about *what to do* with the means of mass communication. As such it calls on us to account for the history of thinking about media in ways that make them objects for study and intervention, whether by academics or, in this case, by the Vatican. Both of these themes let us appreciate the benefits of a capacious sense of what we understand as "media studies" force us to think more carefully about what we have historically understood as media.

As primary documents encyclicals provide rich sources for thinking about the communication of religious doctrine. Although intended for clergy and laity, journalists, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, routinely cover their dissemination. This gives encyclicals the quality, as Clare Donagle explains, of "an extended press release within which a given pope can declare his agenda to the world."[2] In their rhetorical style, encyclicals also express a way of thinking about matters of institutional concern that mixes biblical quotations with previous church doctrine. This has the effect of situating the Catholic Church's intervention within a particular temporal frame, one that "lies outside of history, the possibility of eternal life through Christian faith."[3] For Donagle, the tension between an encyclical's policy objectives and its reminder about the ephemerality of human existence shows how encyclicals reflect a tension "between Christianity's evangelical and existential aspects."[4]

With *Miranda Prorsus* we can see the forward-looking view of the Catholic Church refracted through its more traditional ontological and theological visions. In contrast to the harder-edged encyclical on cinema to U.S. clergy issued by Pius's predecessor, *Vigilanti Cura* (*Vigilant Care*), which called for closer controls and even the censorship of films, *Miranda Prorsus* adopted a tone I would characterize as anxiously optimistic. Blending prior church statements on media with quotations from scripture and references to Thomas Aquinas, the encyclical characterized media in ways familiar to introductory media studies courses: showing considerable respect for its technical possibilities; highlighting its capacity to appeal to sensory perceptions and to provide knowledge of the world; noting its ability to blur boundaries of public and domestic space; and recognizing how "these new forms of art exercise very great influence on the manner of thinking and acting of individuals and every group of men."[5] The document shows the church wrestling with the twin forces of media power: On the one hand, it recognized that these technologies "may be spread among men like good seed which bring forth fruits of truth and goodness"; on the other hand, it later acknowledged that "not all obey the gospel."[6]

[2] Clare Donagle, "The Politics of Extra/Ordinary Time: Encyclical Thinking," *Cogent Arts and Humanities* 4, no. 1 (2017): n.p.

[3] Donagle, "The Politics of Extra/Ordinary Time."

[4] Donagle, "The Politics of Extra/Ordinary Time."

[5] Pius VII, *Miranda Prorsus.*

[6] Pius VII, *Miranda Prorsus.*

In *Miranda Prorsus* we see Pius attempting to tip the balance in his preferred direction. The encyclical argues that Catholics ranging from film critics to bishops must be agents in promoting the responsible arts of mediated communication, to play an active role in publicizing Christian doctrine and encourage media producers to create works that might fulfill the higher potential of art. The document details how some church officials have made use of the capacity of long-distance communication to ensure that "Our voice, passing in sure and safe flight over the expanse of the sea and land and even over the troubled emotions of souls may reach men's minds in a healing influence, in accordance with the demands of the task of the supreme apostolate, confided to Us and today extended without limit."[7] Assessing the various media forms in turn, the encyclical provides instructions for national authorities to lobby for more programs with Catholic themes, to monitor and measure media content, and to train both the producers of media and its audiences to take seriously their respective roles in making and consuming the products of these powerful means of mass communication.

[7] Pius VII, *Miranda Prorsus.*

Furthermore, *Miranda Prorsus* urged the clergy, its administrators, and the Catholic Action groups and affiliated organizations operating locally and nationally to play active roles in teaching the laity and in informing the wider public about how to best make forms of mass communication achieve their spiritual objectives. To do this meant priest should have "a sound knowledge of all questions which confront the souls of Christians with regards to Motion Pictures, Radio, and Television" and "must know what modern, science, art and technique assert whenever they touch on the end of man and his moral and religious life."[8] This involved encouraging clergy to provide guidance for film, television, and radio producers, actors, broadcasters, and distributors, and to make use of media to produce religious content reflecting Christian doctrine. With some of the groundwork established, *Miranda Prorsus* can be viewed as one of a series of major statements the church made about media during this time. Such efforts continued during the Second Vatican Council decree, *Inter Mirifica* (*Among the Wonders*), outlining the church's statement on social communication, which was published just six years later. The document, along with the papal instruction *Communio et Progressio* (*Community and Progress*, 1971), played an important role in the disciplinary development of communication studies within universities in several places around the world.[9]

[8] Pius VII, *Miranda Prorsus.*

In this cursory treatment of *Miranda Prorsus* we can envision some pathways that could enrich the historiography of media studies. In one sense, it reminds us of the powerful place of religious institutions in the historical development of media studies. Menahem Blondheim

[9] For example, see Raúl Fuentes-Navarro, "Institutionalization and Internationalization of the Field of Communication Studies in Mexico and Latin America," and Maria Immacolata Vassallo de Lopes and Richard Romancini, "History of Communication

and Hanael Rosenberg use the term *media theology* to think about "the historical and theoretical project of religious thinking on the relevance of communications to the relationship between God and humans and to the ideological implications of those ideas."[10] If we were to follow Jeremy Stolow's argument that religion and technology "operate along a series of analogous binaries, including faith and reason, fantasy and reality, enchantment and disenchantment, magic and science, and fabrication and fact," then it appears reasonable to ask about the influence of theological thinking on the development of the scholarly field of media studies.[11] Moreover, thinking in terms of media theology asks us to recognize how studies of media have been used to represent religious ideas and to recognize how religious institutions themselves *study media* so as to incorporate them into their own theological activities.

In this respect, we can also consider the encyclical as a form of public deliberation, of thinking out loud about the characteristics of media technologies—of working it out on paper, if you will. "Reasoning is done in public as well as in private," Ian Hacking writes, "but also by talking and arguing and showing."[12] From this we can say that what we may want to call "media studies" can be understood as a mentality or set of dispositions that people occupy at different times and in different contexts, one in which everyone from academic researchers to non-profit organizations sees the expansion of communication technologies as signaling an understanding that broader social and political problems need to be comprehended in media terms. In Anna Shechtman's account of debates over how to understand media at a 1959 gathering in Pennsylvania's Pocono Mountains, we see a range of elite thinkers, from Hannah Arendt to Paul Lazarsfeld to Daniel Bell to James Baldwin, who consider the concept of media as "as a rhetorical vehicle—an overdetermined metaphor for the technical, ideological, and environmental conditions of modern life."[13] Indeed, situated within *Miranda Prorsus* we find the broader concern about media being used as a tool "in those nations where atheistic communism is rampant" to "root out all religious ideals from the mind," a reminder of how *media* is a term used to think *through* and not just *about*.[14]

In that process of thinking things through, we can also consider the decisions made to discard or ignore other forms of argument, evidence, or rhetorical styles, as part of different exercises of power and privilege. From this perspective, *Miranda Prorsus* must be integrated into the *history of arguments about media* to better appreciate what kinds of reasons have been put forward, accepted, and ignored in the process of making an abstract concept such as media its own object of study. If we consider Amin Alhassan's assertion that processes of

in Brazil: The Institutionalization of an Interdisciplinary Field," both in *The International History of Communication Study*, ed. Peter Simonson and David W. Park (New York: Routledge, 2016), for invaluable analyses on the institutionalization of communication studies programs in Mexico and Latin America and Brazil, respectively.

[10] Menahem Blondheim and Hanael Rosenberg, "Media Theology: New Communication Technologies as Religious Constructs, Metaphors, and Experiences," *New Media and Society* 19, no 2 (2016): 44.

[11] Jeremy Stolow, "Introduction: Religion, Technology, and the Things in Between," in *Deus in Machina: Religion, Technology, and the Things in Between*, ed. Jeremy Stolow (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 2.

[12] Ian Hacking, *Historical Ontology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 180.

[13] Anna Shechtman, "Command of Media Metaphors," *Critical Inquiry* 47, no. 2 (2021): 649.

[14] Pius VII, *Miranda Prorsus.* For further discussion, see Frank J. Coppa, "Pope Pius XII and the Cold War: The Confrontation between Catholicism and Communism," in *Religion and the Cold War*, ed. Dianne Kirby (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

knowledge production often erase their connection with colonial and postcolonial subjects and locations, then any discussion of different styles of reasoning about media must be carried out with an aim to re-establishing those connections.[15] This would encourage us to think more closely about the lived effects of the application of academic knowledge in different settings, and to further prompt greater questioning of the canonicity of the concepts that form part of our field of inquiry.

In its appeal for the development of local and regional institutional infrastructure for media education, *Miranda Prorsus* also encourages us to account for the networks of bishops, Catholic Action groups, public information efforts, and mass education campaigns as sites for the production, dissemination, and debate about lay media knowledge.[16] It asks us to consider the extent to which the Catholic Church was engaged in research about media; the role that intellectuals played within those efforts, and the distribution of that research through its different publications. Accounting for the institutional and infrastructural systems of media-knowledge transmission will better equip us to re-situate religious institutions within historiographical accounts of disciplinary development. It will also show how those institutions have acted as sites where media theories are transformed into theological praxis and as clearinghouses for the dissemination of academic and lay knowledge about media.

Finally, the encyclical also pushes us to think about the places where media studies knowledge has been used, misused, and abused in different institutional settings, as part of its pedagogical and educational objectives. What role have media technologies—and the specific knowledge about media that would have inspired their use—played in the church's efforts in the fields of education and media literacy? In the Canadian context in which I am writing this article, it is impossible to not consider this question in relation to the legacy of the residential and day school systems operated by successive governments in partnership with the Catholic Church (as well as churches from other denominations) as part of a system of murder, trauma, separation, disempowerment, and cultural genocide among the country's First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities. According to the 2015 Summary of the Final Report of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, it was during the 1950s and 1960s that "the prime mission of the residential schools was the cultural transformation of Aboriginal children."[17] That history forces us to consider whether an encyclical like *Miranda Prorsus* foreshadowed the deployment of media to support these objectives and to inquire about the kinds of scholarly knowledge that might have used to support structures of forced assimilation and violence both in Canada and else-

[15] Amin Alhassan, "The Canonic Economy of Communication and Culture: The Centrality of the Postcolonial Margins," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 32, no. 1 (2007).

[16] An excellent example of this is François Yelle's discussion of the impact of media-related encyclicals—including *Miranda Prorsus*—in Quebec. See François Yelle, "Fifty Years Ago Today When the Pope Knew Everything There Was to Know About Media" (paper presented at Two Days of Canada conference, Brock University, St. Catherine's, ON, November 6, 2008).

[17] Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*. (Ottawa: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015), 5.

where. Addressing that question would prove valuable for thinking more seriously about the overlapping institutional and disciplinary histories, epistemological frameworks, and ontological categories that constitute the way we have researched, taught, and studied media in different contexts and over time.

Let us, then, embark on this journey to trouble the history of "media studies" in as many contexts as possible. May it begin by going directly to some of the institutions that have been doing media studies alongside so many of us for a long time. Let us ask about the extent to which that knowledge has served to support systems of oppression, control, racism, and colonialism; to appreciate the dynamic between scientific and lay knowledge; to encourage counter-histories of our field; to multiply the contexts in which we appreciate media as an object of study; and to draw attention to ignored and marginalized voices.[18] And let us more reflexively consider the ways that "media studies" can offer a productive approach for undertaking more complex and subtle histories of other areas of academic study.

[18] For example, see Ellen Seiter, *Television and New Media Audiences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 58–60, and Patrick McCurdy "Theorizing 'Lay Theories of Media': A Case Study of the Dissent! Network at the 2005 Gleneagles G8 Summit," *International Journal of Communication* 5 (2011).

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