

Intercultural Communication in a Digital World: Some Considerations

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From his experience in “selection and training of Americans to work in foreign countries for both Government and business,” Edward T. Hall became aware of the need and importance of non-verbal language and Culture. Together with George L. Trager, he developed his seminal book *The Silent Language* from the experience and conviction that “so little is known about cross-cultural communication” which includes also different forms of “nonverbal language which exist in every country of the world and among the various groups within each country” (Intro 1959 p. 14f.). It is reflected in “our handling of time, our spacial relationships, our attitude toward work, play and learning. In addition to what we say, with our verbal language we are constantly communicating our real feelings in our silent language – the language of behavior...”

In his book Hall developed with Traeger a “theory of culture based on a communication model” (p.18) which became the foundation and origin for the new broad and extensive field of Intercultural Communication.

For Hall, “Culture is not an exotic notion studied by a selected

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group of anthropologists in the South Sea. It is a mold in which we all cast, it controls our daily lives in many unsuspected ways ... Culture hides much more than it reveals and strangely enough what it hides, it hides most effectively from its own participants ...” (p. 52f.).

Within intercultural communication, Hall studied beside others especially proximity and also time which – he says – has “everything to do with not only how culture develops but also how people of that culture experience the world. He therefore uses and presents in his later “Dance of Life” the “use of time as a means of gaining insight into culture” (p.5).

Here cultures are considered as somehow structural systems within a geographical reality: Cultures are related to certain groups of people and therefore also geographically determined like different countries or even continents like America, Europe or Asia. Thus, cultures do reflect also geographical differences through their way of life with boundaries and limitations. This might be, however, challenged by new technical developments; Francis Cairncross has described already towards the end of the last century with her book *Death of Distance* (1997/1998) “How the Communications Revolution will change our lives” as the book’s subtitle says. She shows how developments are not any more determined by time zones, location or by size and connections or by filters for the increased amount of information but also give greater access to markets independent from their location. They will be, she predicts, more person-consumer oriented independent from any local fixation but also less influential on political bodies or systems, as she writes in her introduction (pp. XI-XVI). Already those days Cairncross indicated essential elements of our modern digital communication, which for intercultural communication mean that original geographical and even mental limits are disappearing and substituted through a communication without any geographical (and even mental?) limitations. This was already developed and extended in Church documents in 1990 when Pope John Paul II speaks in a document on Mission (*Redemptoris Missio*) of “new ways of communicating, with

new languages, new techniques and a new psychology,” which he describes in the “World Communication Message” of that same year as “part of a still unfolding *culture* whose full implications are as yet imperfectly understood and whose potentialities remain for the moment only partly exploited” (No 4). Later documents (2002) talk about the Internet as a “New Forum” comparing the new development with the old *Forum Romanum*, “where much of the life of the city took place and where the best and the worst of human nature was on display” (cf. Eilers 2014, pp. 440, 518; 470ff.). Cultures, actually throughout his life, were a special concern of this Pope who also created within the Vatican administration a special “Pontifical Council for Culture”.

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Far beyond any Church considerations, such developments are also reflected in the development of Web 1.0, Web 2.0 and the following where the Internet becomes interactive and interrelated, which also affects the field and concerns of intercultural communication, where limits and boundaries between cultures are not completely removed but might be “re-defined”. Cultures exist very much on their own also in this new situation; they are not removed but still have their “boundaries” and specifics even beyond new technical communication possibilities. Cultures are still “unique” also in a new environment where we start to distinguish between “traditional” networks of media and a growing network of digital communication, where in a growing way the traditional means seem to play either no or a very limited role. Following these developments one might distinguish between two different “Communication Platforms,” the “traditional media” and the “new digital ones.” In a growing way people now communicate digitally and not any more in the traditional way which affects not only the communication between people but also whole societies.

In the past, our communication was based and related to the media like Press, Radio/TV and Film which now shifts to digital means related to the Internet in a “Culture of Connectivity” (van Dijk

2013). Here there is a move from “Networked Communication to Platformed Sociality,” which reflects new “techno-cultural” as well as “socioeconomic” structures that are interdependent and interoperable (p. 41). Intercultural communication moved in the past between people of different cultures in a geographically and mentally limited way which presently is no longer the case. With the “Death of Distance,” there are also no more limits for intercultural communication; anybody from one culture anywhere in the world can now “communicate” with everybody else independent of geographical limitations but also with new ways of digital communication far beyond traditional media in the way of so called “social media” or “connective media” – as van Dijk prefers to call them (p.13). This also affects any intercultural initiative, which probably needs today, however, a greater openness and sensitivity for other cultures independent from traditional boundaries. Cultures are now open worldwide but the consequences of this for individuals and societies are probably not yet sufficiently studied and in the awareness of people.

Actually, Fr. Anh Vu Ta from the “Pastoral Communication” Program of the University of Santo Tomas in Manila, commenting on this paper, reminds us in the present situation that “we have to be aware that Internet, social media, apps actually create *new social networks* in the digital world which are totally different from networks we have been familiar with up to now like family, groups, friends, neighborhood, community, etc. In the virtual world, people learn new values and customs that are different from the ones we have received in the past. No institution – either governmental or religious – can fully control or ‘filter out’ the information or values shared in these digital networks, and this happens quickly and has broad dimensions and consequences.”

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Louis Luzbetak defines culture as a plan consisting of norms, standard and associated notions and beliefs for coping with the various demands of life shared by a social group, learned by the individual from society organized into a dynamic system of control and thus being a

“socially shared design for living” (cf. Eilers, p. 23). This does, however, change in principle through new ways of communicating and dealing with each other – though there might be shifts in emphasis of certain elements but not in principle. Culture exists and grounds also in digital communication, although the emphasis in dealing with each other as well as the “speed” and “selection” of communication elements might shift according to cultural facts and norms of content which might be adjusted or somehow influenced by the ways and means of communication. However, this does not change the facts and elements of culture for any group of people. Communication remains an essential and basic element of every culture; no culture can exist without a proper communication within but also to the outside!

All this does, however, not mean that there will be also a “Death of Culture” like the “Death of Distance.” Culture as a way of living of people and societies will continue, although it might be affected by the way we present ourselves and deal with others according to our cultural ways and norms for living. In this way intercultural communication as “communicating between cultures” will continue, though sometimes with changed priorities and experiences.

Intercultural communication will continue to relate us with each other including changed or different priorities which actually can be observed already in comparing different age groups within and between different parts of the population of cultures and their way of living. This also means that in our digital world, culture and intercultural communication continue to be essential elements even though their way of communicating might also change or be influenced by the “Death of Distance.” Nonetheless, this is not only to be seen in the geographical distance but also in a “distance” between minds and even “living” experiences. Thus, specialists on “Media Writing” say that “about 90% of adults get news via mobile or desktop formats either from traditional news outlets or the new, more opinionated. Information services ... increasingly, too, more Americans are turning to multiple social media sites for news (Whitacker, p. 135).

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All this calls also for serious and in depth study of the cultural communicative means and dimensions leading also to a deeper mutual understanding and appreciation of Religion and religious practices as well as life approaches. Religions are in their structures and performances culturally bound. This calls for a deeper understanding of their ways and means in adapting cultures to communicate within themselves and with each other and to also appreciating mutual differences and approaches. Very often religions are, in fact, at the heart of respective cultures as we see in Asia and therefore do need a more serious study and integration also in the perspective of intercultural Communication!

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