

Empathy: the Key to Handle Digital Communications Post-Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This essay establishes the four phenomena that have characterized the pandemic and digital communications. This refers to infodemic, which is the abundance of information and difficulty to manage it; hypersensitivity, indicated in classifying actors as heroes and villains; the development of atypical cycles, which refers to the alteration of behaviors and habits among the population; and disinformation, understood as the presentation of false events with the purpose of manipulation. This work focuses on Jesus as the Communicator par excellence and empathy. Communicators must be empathetic before posting content, in order to guide digital platform users to find what they are seeking for. Therefore, empathic communication is more than speaking kind words of encouragement, sympathy, and consolation. It requires concrete actions as evidence of solidarity, trust, and support. A comprehensive pastoral communication plan for the digital age reflects this paradigm of communication and is cemented in real actions through empathy as a legacy of truth and loving your neighbor.

Keywords: *pandemic, infodemic, hypersensitivity, atypical cycles and disinformation, empathy, digital communications, post-pandemic.*

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1. The Four Digital Communication Phenomena Witnessed During the Pandemic

With over 4,480 million social media users as of 2021,² these digital platforms have become the most popular means to share everyday stories such as family gatherings, trips, new jobs, weddings, as well as pertinent information such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Among the top 20 most popular digital networks are Facebook which amasses over 2.8 billion active users³ globally, Twitter, which has 400 million users worldwide, Instagram, which registers over a billion users, and Tik Tok, claiming 800 million users.⁴

It was precisely the expansion of the pandemic that showed that communication is a complex process, increasingly mediated by digital media through mobile devices. In fact, 7 out of 10 internet users are unique mobile phone users.⁵ According to the global firm IPSOS, in the context of the pandemic, the quarantine became a cycle divided into stages. In the first stage, we went through a long period of uncertainty, which alternated between moments of adjustment and resistance to finally adapt to the new reality. The second stage marked the coming out of lockdown during which relief and fear continued to co-exist. This cycle of constant uncertainty, adaptation, and fear has been the foundation for the rise of four communication phenomena: infodemia, hypersensitivity, atypical cycles, and disinformation, which are defined

² According to Diego Santos, “There are 3,800 million social media users, number which increased over 9% since 2019.” Diego Santos, “97 statistics on social media in 2020,” *HubSpot* (blog), published on November 4, 2020, <https://blog.hubspot.es/marketing/estadisticas-redes-sociales>, paragraph 6.

³ A social media active user is someone who logs in to the site and/or completed some sort of action (liking, sharing, posting, etc.) within the previous 30 days of the data collection. Seek Visibility, “What it means to be active on Social Media – And why is it important?” published on May 27, 2016, <http://www.seekvisibility.com/2016/05/active-on-social-media/>.

⁴ We are social & Hootsuite, “Digital 2021. July global stats report,” published on July 21, 2021, p. 110, <https://es.slideshare.net/DataReportal/digital-2021-july-global-statshot-report-v02>.

⁵ *Ibid.* 75.

below.⁶

Infodemia is a process that unfolds in a parallel manner with the expansion of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is characterized by two factors: (1) Overload of information, which overcomes the management capacity of each person (*infoxication*); and (2) Lack of capacity to identify valuable data among those that are not and differentiate which sources are user trustworthy and which ones are not.

Hypersensitivity refers to the management of narratives that have the intent of manipulation. It presents opposite situations in which some actors are demonized, and others consecrated, presenting or exposing heroes and villains, the good and the bad, the conscious and unconscious. In the communicative environment, the concern is the polarization of balance, which leads to a focus of reality without the different shades that characterize it.

Atypical cycles are behavioral changes that people display during the pandemic regarding the months previous to the expansion, including habits related to the use of the Internet and digital media. The alteration of cycles influences the overload of information and therefore, the generation of amplified favorable and unfavorable reactions. As an example, in 2020, social media presented five times more posting density than usual.⁷ In 2019, Twitter had an average of 500 million tweets per day (7,000 tweets per second); and in 2020, it registered an average of 700 million tweets per day (9,000 tweets per second),⁸ which represents a daily post increase by close to a third. Meanwhile, Google, since February 2020, registered 100 times more searches than those identified in December 2019, 60 percent of them were related to COVID-19.⁹

⁶Albertina Navas, "Infodemia: ¿cómo evitar la desinformación en redes sociales?" published on October 15, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4GolEpJBosc>.

⁷ Diego Santos, "97 statistics on social media in 2020," paragraph 6.

⁸ Internet Live Stats, "In 1 second, each and every second, there are," accessed on October 9, 2021, <https://www.internetlivestats.com/one-second/>.

⁹ Google Trends, "El año en búsquedas 2020," accessed on October 9, 2021, <https://trends.google.com/trends/yis/2020/GLOBAL/>.

Finally, **disinformation** is the phenomenon commonly referred to as fake news. Nevertheless, as mentioned by Orihuela in the article “Information disorders (better than fake news),” “The framing fake news is too ambiguous for an increasingly complex phenomenon, which includes the spatial or temporal decontextualization of news, humor, memes, errors, political manipulation, and social alarm.”¹⁰ Based on this statement, it is recommended to employ the term disinformation rather than fake news because it implies either delivering real news in false contexts, false information in real contexts or false information without context. The actual intent of this misleading or distorted information is that audiences are bound to make conclusions that are not valid (Bounegru, et al, 2018).

A study conducted in Spain during the peak months of the pandemic confirmed that 6 out 10 hoaxes were related to COVID-19. However, in most cases, it was not possible to determine the channel through which misleading information was transmitted. In addition, it was identified that the most common platforms used with that intent were WhatsApp (25%) and Twitter (14%). To sum up, in 74 percent of the cases the sources were being supplanted or anonymous. Thus, it can be inferred that educated, informed, and critical audiences shared these data or supported them.¹¹

2. Communication Should be a Theological Matter

The term “communication”, etymologically speaking, comes from the Old French word *comun*, meaning “common, general, free, open, public”, from Latin *communis*, meaning “in common, public, shared by all or many; general, not specific; familiar, not pretentious.” This is from a reconstructed compound **ko-moin-i-* “held in common,” compound adjective formed from **ko-* “together” + **moi-n-*, suffixed form of root **mei-* (1) “to

¹⁰ José Luis Orihuela. “Information disorders (better than fake-news),” *Medium* (blog), published in Jan 22, 2018, <https://jlori.medium.com/trastornos-de-la-informaci%C3%B3n-mejor-que-fake-news-7a9ae44f7cc7>, paragraph 2.

¹¹ Ramón Salaverría et al., “Disinformation in Times of Pandemic: Typology of Hoaxes on Covid-19,” *El profesional de la información* 29, No. 3 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2020.may.15>.

change, go, move,” hence literally “shared by all.”¹²

Even though Theology and Communication are presented as conceptually distinct disciplines, for some scholars studying subjects related with Religion, these two concepts are intimately connected. Based on the Second Vatican Council’s document *Inter Mirifica* (1963), the Pontifical Council for Social Communication’s *Communio et Progressio* (1971/1975), and *Aetatis Novae* (1992), the processes of communication in Church and society opens the door to a more cultural grounding of communication. Therefore, this should be of interest to theologians.¹³ In fact, Avery Dulles¹⁴ calls Christianity “a religion of communication,” based on the elements of Trinity, Revelation, and Incarnation. These elements refer to the great mystery of self-communication, understood as follows:

- **Trinity.** The Christian understanding of God’s self-communication is based on God’s character as God who relates and communicates with his creatures.
- **Revelation.** The entire Scripture speaks about God as a communicating God. He communicates with His creatures.
- **Incarnation.** This is the central Christian doctrine that God became flesh, that God assumed human nature and became a man in the form of Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the second person of the Trinity. Christ was truly God and truly man.

Therefore, Christians should be inspired by the example of Jesus as the communicator *par excellence*, since He refers to Himself as the

¹² *Online Etymology Dictionary*, communication (n.), accessed on February 6, 2022, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/communication>.

¹³ Paul A. Soukup, “A Dialogue on Communication and Theology: Theological Reflection and Communication,” *New Theology Review* 8, No. 4 (1995): 5-12, access <https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1077&context=comm>.

¹⁴ Avery Dulles, *The Communication of Faith and Its Content* (Washington D.C.: National Catholic Educational Association, 1985).

Way, the Truth, and the Life. In addition, on being asked by the Pharisees when the Kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, “The coming of the Kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘there it is,’ because the Kingdom of God is in your midst”. Consequently, Christians are at their best and most relevant when they courageously uphold the truths that have been taught by Jesus and through the Church.

In this context, there are some challenges associated with religion in the Internet domain. The main concern is the lack of moral and religious authority over all the content that is promulgated online since anyone can become a prosumer (producer + consumer) of information, intentionally or unintentionally misleading rather than informing. The Internet is full of ideologies and propaganda as well as content aiming to proselytize and sow seeds of mistrust and hatred towards and among religions.

Analyzing this environment, Grant Kien¹⁵ classified twenty-two cyberbullying tactics, from posting cruel information and damaging reputations (dissing) to publicly revealing sensitive information (doxing), including different forms of intimidation (flaming, hate speech, dogpiling...) and usual ways of stalking and harassing. Some digital communication forces social media users to face the combination of speed, global reach, and simulacra signification, all elements conspiring to create a new scale of emotional appeal, which is both exceptionally gratifying in digital consumer culture while disorienting the sense of practical judgment.

Therefore, in a self-replicating, emotion-based, and virally distributed distorted system, Jesus is the role model to follow based on His specialized custom-made communication (parables) to an inclusive approach recognizing and respecting the interlocutor’s world view, culture, knowledge, and experiences. All this is accompanied by deep listening and non-verbal demonstrations such as wholeheartedly touching sick people’s hands, while transmitting His healing power. Matthew remarks that the crowds were amazed at His teachings because He had moral authority, not as their teachers of the law (Mat 7:28-29). Therefore,

¹⁵ Grant Kien, *Communicating with Memes. Consequences in Post-truth Civilization* (Lexington Books, 2019).

Jesus is present in all communication that seeks to carry his Word and serve others, that is to say in all the Good News of the Gospel that should be spread to all.

3. Empathy: The Key to Handle the Post-Pandemic Digital Communications Phenomena

Technology has been responsible for creating significantly useful resources, which place all the information we need within our reach, but at the same time, it has dramatically changed our daily lives. There are three main impact areas of technology: 1) Structural—the way it impacts our daily life, marking the rhythm of encounters; 2) Relational—the way it strengthens or weakens the link among individuals, including their roles; and 3) Social—the way it fosters public interactions and conversations with stakeholders.¹⁶

Communicating life is more than speaking kind words of encouragement, sympathy, and consolation. It requires concrete actions that communicate solidarity, trust, and support. A comprehensive pastoral communication plan for the digital age reflects this paradigm of communication and is concretized in real actions on behalf of the people of God. In this sense, digital social media has been consolidated as the opportune channel to unite speakers around the world, beyond geographic and cultural elements, as well as to promote relations characterized by interculturality and interaction.

In this scenario, empathy is the key as it is an invitation to put ourselves in the suffering person's place and imagine their predicament as our own. Nonetheless, empathetic behavior can sometimes extend its circle of concern. Subjects will tend to experience compassion toward the people and projects that are being served. This is why the moral achievement of extending concern to others does not necessarily precede compassion but can be coeval with it.¹⁷

¹⁶ Sara Malo Cerrato, "Mobile Phone's Impact in 12 to 16 Years Old Teenagers' Lives," *Comunicar* No. 27 (2006): 105-112, ISSN: 1134-3478.

¹⁷ Martha C. Nussbaum, "Compassion & Terror," *The MIT Press*

Occasionally, empathy is confused with sympathy, but these terms differ. While empathy implies putting oneself in someone else's shoes, sympathy is a legitimate concern of an individual for what another person is going through and the intent to offer alternative solutions from a personal point of view, but without establishing a deep connection with the interlocutor. This leads to an approximation of the pain of the other in a superficial manner and without abandoning the particular point of view, which does not allow connecting with the feeling of the person facing the problem.¹⁸ In empathy, three components are interrelated: the cognitive, the emotional, and the compassionate.¹⁹

The cognitive element implies the intent to see the situation that the other person is going through from that individual's own perspective, setting aside one's personal opinion when facing a problem.

The emotional element requires sharing the other person's emotions, even if one does not understand the other's feelings or share the same experiences.

Finally, the compassionate element encourages one to face another person's pain, offering spontaneous support to make the other feel better,²⁰ even if no definite solution is offered.

Therefore, in empathy the emotion of one person is shared without judgment from the other person, supporting them throughout the process, from their own perspective and at their pace.

132, No. 1 (2003), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/20027819.pdf>.

¹⁸Terrie Black, "Empathy, Not Sympathy," *Rehabilitation Nursing* 45, No. 5, (September/October 2020): 243-244, doi: 10.1097/RNJ.0000000000000286.

¹⁹ Joris Janssen, "A Three-Component Framework for Empathic Technologies to Augment Human Interaction," *J Multimodal User Interfaces*, No. 6 (2012):143-161, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12193-012-0097-5#Sec2>.

²⁰ Albertina Navas, "Empathy: the compassionate link between self and others," (presentation *Program Faith Communication in the Digital World*, April 24, 2021), https://drive.google.com/file/d/1NiKKJO7VXeaw7GjNTdXyJMxX9PbrK7DN/view?usp=drive_web.

As stated by Matthew Carpenter, former Latin America Partner Manager at Twitter, during a personal interview: “The key competency in understanding digital environments is decoding how a person produces and consumes information.” In the same perspective, Henry Jenkins has studied more than a decade the concept of convergence culture. “Convergence does not take place through media devices, however sophisticated that these can become. Convergence occurs in the brain of individual consumers and through their social interactions with others.”²¹

Therefore, in the digital world, when presenting and posting content, it is important to proceed with empathy. This means that information to be delivered should be seen from the perspective of potential recipients, meditating on the fact that users are in search of the truth, regardless of its nature or how a person would like to have access to that truth. Taking as a foundation the definition of empathy and its elements, there are seven suggestions²² established in order to promote connections with interlocutors in social media and to avoid the saturation of information, the confrontation of those considered heroes and villains, atypical cycles, and disinformation.

These recommendations might be useful either for religious leaders active in social media or for those responsible for managing social media profiles on behalf of religious institutions:

a. To be present for others: This aims to offer attention and respect to users, through the presentation of content according to the nature of each platform. Pope Francis sets a strong example of being present for others. He excels in the four digital leadership characteristics stated by Juan Narbona:

- 1) Appropriateness,
- 2) Timeliness,

²¹ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: The Media Convergence Culture* (Barcelona, Spain: Paidós, 2008), <https://stbngtrrz.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/jenkins-henry-convergence-culture.pdf>.

²² Melody Wilding, “7 habits of highly empathetic people,” published on January 7, 2019, <https://www.inc.com/melody-wilding/7-habits-of-highly-empathetic-people.html>.

- 3) Technical specializations, and
- 4) Relationship.²³

This good practice refers to the combination of Appropriateness and Technical specialization, which means being consistent with the context in which the leader is a reference point, while posting information adequately adapted to specific language, formats, and frequency of the platform. For example, Pope Francis' Twitter account, @Pontifex, usually shares tweets about the love of God, Christ, and the Church using hashtags and mentions (@), while his Instagram account (@Franciscus) is full of pictures and videos, several of them, tailor-made for that social network.

b. Active listening: This refers to dedicating time to identify the preferences and motivations of users based on social listening tools. These tools gather and analyze social media users' data from a variety of platforms. Commercial brands use this data to improve marketing, operational, and business metrics, religious leaders and institutions may take advantage of social listening tools in order to identify the needs, fears, and hopes of their communities. In that context, they may build a discourse aimed to either support or encourage people, based on a robust narrative enriched with ethical, functional and emotional arguments.

c. Tuning in with non-verbal communication: Emoji is a Japanese term used for ideograms, which are those kinds of little drawings that represent concepts typical of Japanese writing. Emoji is the union of the word *image*, which in Japanese means "said", and *moji*, which in Japanese means "character". Emojis are the emoticons used in text conversations through digital devices in order to represent an emotional reaction toward something that is said or written—it is a kind of non-verbal language of chats. The use of emojis is wide-spread and it is a sign of being familiar with the digital environment. Even though the use of emojis is recommended for all social media users, some religious leaders have raised a

²³ Juan Narbona, "Digital Leadership, Twitter and Pope Francis," *Church, Communication and Culture* 1, No. 1 (2016): 90-109, DOI: 10.1080/23753234.2016.1181307.

point of caution. For example, Ahmadullah, a prominent Muslim cleric from Bangladesh, has issued a ruling on a contended point of Islamic law against people using the “Haha” emoji (😂) to mock other people. In his decision statement, Ahmadullah writes, “Entertainment is not prohibited in Islam. But your entertainment should not be the cause of other’s pain.”

d. Taking time to pause: In the digital environment, it is very easy to engage in useless, irrelevant, and toxic conversations. Therefore, taking time to pause is an invitation to reflect before replying, especially when receiving negative or inappropriate comments. Many people post negative comments to pursue a negative response from the other individual in order to portray themselves as victims. This is the reason why pausing is an opportunity to learn about the audience, to listen actively, while trying to identify the main arguments of the criticism. It is recommended to wait five to eight minutes before replying to a negative post; the key is to take this time to develop a comprehensive response that would be indicative of a respectful, empathic, and sensitive behavior consistent with the expectations of either a religious leader or institution.

e. Asking instead of advising: It is usual for religious leaders and religious institutions to be exposed to personal comments on their social media feeds. This is not uncommon since many people follow a religious leader’s social media to find support. In that scenario, the recommendation is to not reply publicly, instead to reply through a direct message. A good practice is to ask questions to build closeness before giving advice. Some of these questions to create greater connection might include: How do you feel about it? Can you tell me more? What would be helpful? The objective is fostering dialogue, incentivizing interaction, and showing that religious leaders or institutions are open to listening and understanding the situations of the people.

f. Prioritizing the “we” before the “I”: The problems and opportunities created by new technology, as it is enhanced by globalization, deregulation and privatization of media, present new ethical and spiritual challenges, particularly to those who work

in social communications. In this context, it is recommended that regardless of the content of a third-party's post on social media, to use "we" instead of "I" in the reply by a religious leader or religious organization. Speaking in first-person plural (we) helps to generate a sense of belonging and empowerment among users, making them feel not alone. In his 2019 World Communication Day Message, Pope Francis affirmed the position of the Church regarding ICT when he said that the Internet is "a resource of our time." Therefore, a compassionate and inclusive approach to using social media is a way of serving the people of God.

g. Imagine other people's point of view: In social media, before posting content, it is imperative to put oneself in the other users' place and reflect on their needs, fears, challenges, and expectations. If their needs are clearly understood, it is easier to offer support; and if their fears are understood, ways to eliminate them can be proposed. If we connect to the people's expectations, we can more effectively motivate spiritual advancement by the people. These actions reflect empathy, which according to Rene Brown, is feeling with the person, climbing down the hole to sit beside him or her, making oneself vulnerable to sincerely connecting with the other person. Indeed, religious leaders must exercise empathy if they aim to serve others with the ability to detect their emotions and understand their perspectives.

4. Final Thoughts

The phenomena of infodemic, hypersensitivity, atypical cycles, and disinformation were brewing even before the COVID-19 pandemic. However, they were aggravated with the arrival of the coronavirus, when facing an unknown reality that affected the life and possibilities of interaction among people worldwide. Therefore, empathy is perceived as the remedy by religious communicators and social media users to make a counterweight to the consequences of these pandemic phenomena. Despite the serious communicational consequences of the pandemic, the people of God may also become carriers of truth and the

Good News accepting differences and promoting interculturality as an enriching nexus.

Based on the fact that digital communication has benefited the Church in implementing her missionary programs, the pastoral communication plan should give due importance to developing digital leadership by taking care to include the following:

- **Digital literacy.** Helping religious leaders to adopt a balanced disposition towards ICT and become aware that digital leadership is a natural and essential component of religious leadership in the present milieu. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many religious leaders resorted to social media to communicate with the flock during periods of lockdowns, some for the first time in their pastoral career. In the digital age, the ability to use different means of communication should be a natural skill in a church leader.
- **Ongoing training.** Training programs for religious leaders should include topics such as pastoral communication theology and ICT, as well as its ethical, theological, and pastoral implications of using these communication media. Without these theological foundations, church leaders may easily fall into the traps of engaging in idle chats, self-aggrandizement, and inappropriate exchanges. Seminary and religious training should include seminars and workshops that address the various dimensions of ICT.
- **Peer to peer knowledge sharing.** Parishes and dioceses should organize workshops and seminars on ICT for lay pastoral leaders. As lay leaders collaborate closely with the pastor, their familiarity and even expertise in ICT will be of tremendous benefit to the pastoral work of the parish. This training should include how to integrate online and offline pastoral activities into a unified pastoral plan, where both support one another .
- It is no longer feasible to compartmentalize the digital

and the analog spheres. Not only what happens in one environment impacts the other, oftentimes, what happens in the physical sphere is the direct result of what has taken place in cyberspace.

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