CHRISTIAN INSTITUTE FOR
CHRISTE
THEOLOGICAL ENGAGEMENT

THE DIGITAL CONTINENT

RESPONSIBLE COMMUNICATION IN A PANDEMICISED WORLD

Contributed by CHRISTE Research Fellows
Edited by Sherman Kuek OFS

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and guest author, Annie Ling

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PREAMBLE

The COVID-19 pandemic rages on despite the wide distribution of the vaccines around the world. Of course, it is common knowledge that the distribution of these vaccines is unequal; but let us leave that as a matter for a separate discussion. And yet, how do we know of this globally disproportionate distribution of vaccines? Why, through the communications of the mass media, of course! And *communication* is precisely the topic that concerns the authors of this book.

Throughout this pandemic, the only way by which the world population has been able to keep abreast of the global situation as well as the developments in infections and vaccination rates within their respective contexts has been through news reports communicated through the mass media. Considering the proliferation of social media, we also cannot forget the amount of information communicated through these platforms, which (I suspect) may have had a greater impact on the populace than that of mainstream or traditional mass media.

There are various prospects and pitfalls associated with the ease with which communication takes place in our world. Given that information is powerful and can profoundly shape minds and societies, progressively impacting civilisations for better or for worse, Christians must be able to think about the activity of communication through a worldview of faith. This means that we must be equipped to communicate responsibly so that we share information that positively forms society out of love for our neighbour. It also means that we must be sufficiently discerning to receive information by processing, analysing, and believing it prudently so that our consequent actions as a result of this information are responsible rather than detrimental to the self and to others.

This book represents a humble attempt at contributing to the development of our Christian engagement with the enterprise of

communication that permeates human civilisation today. But despite being a humble contribution, I believe that it is a unique one in that there are not many teams of theologians on a global scale that formally and solemnly incorporate the scholarly labours of academics from social scientific fields of studies into their own. More than ever, as a theologian and a pastoral practitioner of the faith in my own ecclesial context, I am increasingly developing a strong conviction that theologians cannot alienate themselves from societal realities, let alone scientific methodologies. The two realms of academic pursuits are not meant to be mutually exclusive. For this reason, I am confident to make the claim that there is important knowledge here to be imparted to fellow Christians which they would otherwise not have encountered in other Christian publications. It is my hope, as well as the hope of the rest of the contributing authors, that the knowledge acquired by the readers of this book somehow helps them to develop a more critical engagement with their practice of communication, in addition to the knowledge they may have gleaned from other works on communication (be they religious or secular).

The first contribution by Dr Jonathan Chan, "Reflections on a Theology of Communication", invites the readers to understand, in a brief but systematic manner, how the concern for communication is intrinsic to the Christian faith. At the heavy risk of oversimplifying his astutely written essay, one might logically and faithfully conclude from it that humanity would never have a possibility of knowing God if communication did not exist or if God did not communicate such awareness of Himself to creation. Further to that, knowledge of God could also not have been shared among human beings if communication was not intrinsic to human life. I shall leave it to the readers to scrutinise for themselves the rest of the author's constructions in the essay itself, lest any pertinent and crucial point, no matter how minute, be overlooked.

The second contribution is my own, "The Great Digital Continent: The Intensifying Challenge of *Inter Mirifica*". This essay pertains to one of

the earliest documents promulgated by the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), and it is very specifically a document on social communications. While I belong to the Catholic tradition of the Christian faith, I believe that we as brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ share many challenges together in our respective ecclesial contexts. For those of us who take seriously the mandate of our Lord Jesus Christ to be witnesses of His Gospel, communication must be one of these challenges we share in common. Therefore, I believe that my assessment of how far the mandate of *Inter Mirifica* has been successfully implemented in the Catholic Church applies also to the rest of the Christian community seeking to live and witness to this faith with fidelity.

The third contribution by Mr Doulos Paul Lee, "Christian Ethics of Communication: Perspectives from Behavioural Science", provides for an utterly educational and enlightening way of synthesising the ethics of responsible communication with the Christian imperative of love for God and neighbour. In his essay, the author introduces the readers to concepts of communication that stem from his specialised field of study and applies these concepts to various principles of Christian responsibility in the context of communication. This brief essay is instructive in helping the readers to understand very practical and foundational principles that should guide their involvement in the world of communication.

The fourth contribution to the book examines the aspect of communication from a more interpersonal perspective. Miss Annie Ling's essay, "Constructive Use of Communication", helps readers to examine the different dimensions of the communication activity. The author succinctly instructs readers on how communication involves persons as well as particular contexts in addition to the intended message itself. The primary concern of this essay, given the specialisation of the author, is how communication can be undertaken in ways that are constructive to interpersonal relationships. It must also follow that if communication can be constructive, it can also be potentially damaging or, at the very least,

challenging to relationships; the essay prescribes how we may communicate constructively in difficult circumstances.

The final contributor to this conversation is Dr Pauline Leong, whose essay entitled "Communicating Responsibly through Social Media" drives the emphasis of this book across in a most succinct manner. The title of the essay immediately highlights the tone of its content. We perhaps consume more social media today than we do other forms of media. The author provides an in-depth understanding of how the employment of social media has contributed to the betterment of modern life. However, and perhaps more seriously, social media platforms have also been exploited as tools for the destruction of individuals. This essay provides many crucial examples to demonstrate the reality of these abuses and the detriments that such abuses have caused. Like the contributions before it, the author of this essay emphatically highlights the importance of being media literate so that we may engage responsibly in modern forms of communication.

This is the second electronic book published by the Christian Institute for Theological Engagement (CHRISTE). It is produced as a result of vigorous cross-disciplinary research, thorough scholarly analyses and interpretation, and thoughtful theological response with regard to the subject matter. At the same time, in keeping with the character of our research institute, the writing of the book is done in a manner that can be comfortably understood by the average person in the Christian populace. As before, I remind the readers that our authors write from the perspectives of various Christian traditions whilst holding to the dictum commonly attributed to the fourth-century Saint Augustine of Hippo on whose memorial we established CHRISTE in 2020: "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity."

I humbly request that readers take particular note that this book is published in special tribute to the late Cornelius Cardinal Sim, our

inaugural Ecclesiastical Patron, who passed away on May 29, 2021. His Eminence was Vicar Apostolic of the Vicariate of Brunei Darussalam, and also the President of the Regional Episcopal Commission for Social Communications (RCSC) of Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei of the Catholic Church. Those who knew him at a more personal level are aware of the pastoral concern he had for the potentials and pitfalls of communication as an important exercise in the mission of the Church. It is therefore fitting that this book is published in honour of His Eminence's life and ministry to the People of God.

If you are reading this book and have never heard of CHRISTE before, we are a gathering of Christian scholars chartered as a research institute under the prerogative of the United Nations Treaty Series 49006/49007. In our efforts to provide a common witness to the Christian faith, our given task and methodology is to interpret, analyse, and respond to societal realities through the Christian mind. More detailed information about us is found at the end of this book.

With every contribution of my esteemed colleagues to the work of CHRISTE, my admiration of them deepens significantly. It is not common for me to encounter scholars who are able to produce works that are both academically vigorous and sincerely generous in ways that powerfully contribute to the faith development of their readers. More than once, I have personally conveyed my sentiments to a number of them that it is the Spirit of God who has put us together for this sacred task of sanctifying society with the gift of scholarly work that He has entrusted to us.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

On October 19, 2021, the Memorial of Saint Paul of the Cross,

Rev. Deacon Prof. Dr Sherman Kuek, OFS
Cornelius Cardinal Sim Professor of Theology and Dialogue

REFLECTIONS ON A
THEOLOGY OF COMMUNICATION

Dr JHW Chan

In the last two years, the Covid-19 pandemic has brought the practice and outworking of communication into sharp focus. Businesses, institutions and individuals have had to re-evaluate how they function in the light of the varying degrees of lockdowns and restrictions imposed on movement by respective governments. Much of the world's population has been affected by this shift in how we connect with one another.

Given our current situation and renewed awareness of the importance of communication, a brief treatise on the *theology* of communication seems well timed. However, communication in one form or another has always been at the heart of the Christian faith and tradition. In this short paper, I attempt to give some examples of this and outline some of the areas which might feature in a theology of communication (hereafter TOC). Sadly, a detailed investigation and explication of the areas alluded to here lies beyond the scope of this essay. I hope merely to gesture toward some of the possible topics that might be included and addressed by a TOC, and in doing so, highlight the significance of communication in theology.

Definitions and Distinctions

Sufficient for our purposes here, I take communication to be the transmitting of information, regardless of the medium used. The discipline of theology is concerned with speaking about God, His relation to Himself and creation. Or as Herbert McCabe is often quoted as saying, "[theology] is not concerned with trying to say what God is but in trying to stop us

talking nonsense [about God]".[1] Thus, we might begin by pointing out that communication is fundamental to theology, both in its practice and in the nature of its subject matter. With respect to the latter, communication is of course, essential, both in the revelation of God to humanity, and *kerygma*, the proclamation of the Gospel by human beings. If this is the case, one might argue that a TOC is inseparable from theology itself. As obvious as this may be, the degree of overlap would not be all together helpful when trying to formulate a TOC. Thus, a way of differentiating TOC from theology in general might be to make a more fine grained distinction between the two by focusing on communication specifically, *within* the various areas of theology. One way to do so, I suggest, would be to distinguish between the different kinds of agents involved, namely divine and human beings. Communication between and within these categories of persons would include the divine to the divine, the divine to human, and human to human interaction. This is not a logically exhaustive list but would go some way in covering what might intuitively feature in a TOC. That which is left out by this categorisation would include non-human creatures, such as animals or spiritual beings (angels and demons). The relationships omitted, would be the interaction amongst themselves and with God and humans. How God might communicate with the heavenly host or to non-humanly creatures, and how spiritual beings might engage one another would make for a fascinating discussion, as would interaction between human beings and the spiritual/animal realm, but due to considerations of space I set this conversation aside for another time.

The remainder of this chapter will outline areas of TOC within those three initial categories.

Communication Between the Divine Persons

The traditional understanding of God in the Christian faith is that He is three Persons in one same divine substance. Taking care to remain on

the right side of orthodoxy and the Ecumenical Councils, we do not collapse this tension by saying that there are three separate gods, nor do we say that there is only one divine Person. From Tradition, we understand that the Son is begotten by the Father and the Spirit proceeds (or spirates) from the Father[2] but the mechanism by which this occurs remains a mystery. It certainly seems that comprehension of the inner workings of the triune God are beyond the limits of our understanding: the Persons of the Trinity *ad intra*, that is, God in Himself, distinct from creation, communicate eternally in the absence of temporal succession, that is, atemporally. Given that God precedes creation, He exists independently of time and space, thus the means of communication within the Godhead would be unlike anything we have ever experienced or dare I say, beyond that which we could even imagine.[3] The notion of *perichoresis* may go some way in helping us capture the difficulty of approaching the concept of communication within the Godhead. *Perichoresis* is defined as a "complete mutual interpenetration of two substances that preserves the identity and properties of each intact".[4] The term was first used of the relationship between the divine and human natures in Christ[5] and later applied to the persons of the Trinity. It has been described as "a kind of theological black box"[6] which fills the gap in our human understanding of how the Persons of the Trinity may be related sufficiently intimately to be counted as one God, but also sufficiently distinct – without a commingling of natures that allows each Person to be counted as separate from the others. Given the difficulty we have in understanding the relationship of Persons in the Trinity, it comes as no surprise that our grasp of the communication within this relationship might also be somewhat foggy. This first category of communication (between divine Persons) will surely be the most abstract. For a TOC, discussion will become more practical as we move toward communication between human beings – this, however, is what we would expect given that we have a much less firm a grip on the nature of the divine and timelessness than we do of our own lived and time-bound, human reality.

Communication Between the Divine and Humans

Two prime examples of communication between God and humans would be the Incarnation – the act of the second Person of the Trinity, the Word assuming human nature, and prayer. With respect to the Incarnation, it is the central doctrine of Christianity where God has revealed Himself in human history in the Person of Jesus Christ. Christ is a divine Person, with a human nature. How exactly one cashes this out and understands the way in which the Word has come to have a human nature has varied over the last two thousand years. Most of the tradition has thought that Christ has an immaterial soul (ala Augustine and John Calvin), or is some combination of flesh and soul (ala Aquinas' hylomorphism). More recently, some Christian philosophers have put forward the view that Christ may have been a material being without an immaterial soul.[7] Whatever the exact metaphysics of human beings one lands on (which also describe Christ's humanity), it is agreed on an orthodox view that Christ is a divine Being with a human nature. Thus technically, all interactions Christ had during His time on earth would count as communication between the divine and humans. Joseph Ratzinger writes that communication between the divine is the source of Jesus' divine and human communication in the Incarnation:

> Jesus is only able to speak about the Father in the way he [sic] does because he is the Son, because of his [sic] filial communion with the Father… in other words, the mystery of the Son as revealer of the Father – is present in everything Jesus says and does.

He goes on to say that "We have said that in Jesus' filial communion with the Father, his [sic] human soul is also taken up into the act of praying… The disciple who walks with Jesus is thus caught up with him into communion with God".

This is particularly interesting as it ties in with the other example of human/divine communication in this section: the practice of prayer comes full circle in that it is the outworking of the relationship of the Son to the Father (divine/divine communication) that leads to human/divine communication. The Word communicating with the Father is an *ad intra* activity, but Christ's human nature is caught up in this event and in this way, Jesus is an example to us in how we ourselves, as humans, communicate with God.

The phenomenon of prayer is complex when one considers the nature of God and His relation with the world. There are of course numerous positions on how God relates to time and His creation.[8] Though one such problem for those who believe that God is atemporal (as the majority of the tradition believes) is the challenge of explaining how He might communicate in "real time" if he experiences all times "at once".[9] It may be as John Calvin points out, that when God speaks it only with the *appearance* of Him being in time as we are.[10]

Another example of divine to human communication (albeit an ambiguous one) might be the question of how the human and divine *natures* in Christ might communicate or interact.[11] I call this ambiguous because Christ's human nature is not a person *per se* (on the pain of nestorianism) so the communication that takes place here is not between a divine and human agent, but rather something that takes place between His human and divine attributes – the *communicatio idiomatum*!

At this point in the paper, we may be tempted to think that the issues we have discussed so far all belong in the domain of systematic or philosophical theology. We would be correct in thinking so, but it is not a logical contradiction to state that discussion of these might also belong in a TOC. Theology is not a subject that can be so neatly divided and there are often overlaps in the various subspecialities. Here I simply point out for example, that a full discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity would involve

metaphysical elements from philosophical theology, developments from historical theology, and the nuances of scripture from biblical studies, among others.

Communication Between Humans

As we have noted so far, discussion of communication which involves the divine, yields a more philosophical approach for a TOC, especially when reflecting on the metaphysical aspects of communication and the role it takes within the Godhead, Incarnation and humanity. In comparison, human to human communication is undoubtedly less abstract and more practical (as mentioned above), given our greater familiarity with everyday material and empirical reality. A TOC concerned with these elements of communication might most appropriately be thought to centre around investigation of the proclamation and propagation of the Gospel and/or the formation of Scripture. Here one might discuss the evolution of communication in the history and development of Christianity and its role in the Church – that is, taking a more historical theological approach to TOC. Events and issues that may be of note might include for one, the history of the oral tradition and the forming of the biblical canon. Paul Soukup points out that although the New Testament comes to us in written form today, the first news of the risen Lord came by way of proclamation. "The format of the gospels [sic], and most especially the Gospel of John, reflects the oral nature of their composition."[12] The initial medium of communication of the early Church was oral in nature.

Another important area of discussion for a TOC in this category may be the impact of the printing press as a medium of communication during the time of the Protestant Reformation. The significance of this means of mass producing books and leaflets and the part it played in Luther's reformation cannot be dismissed – it allowed the sixteenth century reformers to propagate their ideas like never before.[13] The explosion in the

spread of ideas and the shifting of paradigms might be compared to the age of hyper connectivity that we are experiencing today with the internet, social media and the various video conferencing platforms that currently are available to us.

In a 1993 edition of the *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America*, Frances Ford Plude, in discussing a TOC, asks how modern communication technologies might "impact the search for religious meaning and its expression".[14] Thus an important task for a TOC is surely to identify the latest developments in technology, and identify how this (in line with *Aetatis Novae* 1992)[15] calls for "ongoing theological reflection upon the processes and instruments of social communication and their role in the Church and society".[16] Sherman Kuek interacts with these issues in the second essay of this book. This pressing question and others like it are the focus of subsequent chapters in this collection – the practical aspects of communication, and the emphasising of communication between individuals and communities. Another theme discussed in this book is the examination of the usefulness and pitfalls of our contemporary means of exchanging information. In general, this may be what readily comes to mind when speaking of a TOC, although I hope to have shown here that the contemporary forms of how we communicate the Gospel is not all there is to a TOC.

To my mind, a TOC ought to cover the broad spectrum of issues that touch on many areas in theology, ranging from the doctrinal to practical. As a last example of this, there is of course human communication in the role each of us plays in the life of the Church, as the intermediary in communicating sacramental grace to one another. This form of communication involves human participation in divine life and in so doing, there is a convergence of the vertical and horizontal which helps to reflect the holistic nature of communication in theology.[17]

NOTES

1   Herbert McCabe, *God Still Matters* (London; New York: Continuum, 2005), 216.

2   Or the Father *and* the Son, according to the Western tradition.

3   More anon on God's relationship to time.

4   R.E. Otto, "The Use and Abuse of *Periochoresis*", *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54(03), 366.

5   See Gregory Nazianzus, *Epistle* 101 and Oliver Crisp, "Problems with *Perichoresis*", *Tyndale Bulletin*, 56.1 (2005) 121-2.

6   Oliver Crisp, "Problems with *Perichoresis*", 119.

7   See Trenton Merricks "Dualism, Physicalism and the Incarnation" in Peter Van Inwagen and Dean W. Zimmerman, eds., *Persons: Human and Divine* (New York: Clarendon Press, 2007).

8   For a helpful introduction, see Gregory E. Ganssle and Paul Helm, eds., *God & Time: Four Views* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2001) and Gregory E. Ganssle and David M. Woodruff, eds., *God and Time: Essays on the Divine Nature* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

9   Compare with Augustine, "In the Eternal, on the other hand, nothing passes away, but the whole is simultaneously present", *Confessions*, Book 11, Chapter XI, accessed October 1, 2021, https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/110111.htm.

10   "For who is so devoid of intellect as not to understand that God, in so speaking, lisps with us as nurses are wont to do with little children? Such modes of expression, therefore, do not so much express what kind of a being God is, as accommodate the knowledge of him to our feebleness. In doing so, he must, of course, stoop far below his proper height." John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1.13.1).

11   As mentioned previously, *perichoresis* was first applied to the hypostatic union in Christ. Crisp uses the term nature-*perichoresis* to designate the application of *perichoresis* in the two natures of Christ, and person-*perichoresis* when used of the Trinity. Again, a detailed analysis here is beyond the consideration of this chapter but see Oliver Crisp, *Divinity and Humanity: The Incarnation Reconsidered* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007) for a discussion on these relevant issues in Christology.

12   Paul A. Soukup, "Communication, Cultural Form and Theology", *The Way*, Supplement no. 57 (1986): 79.

13   F.W. Dillistone, "The Theology of Communication", accessed October 1, 2021, https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/churchman/066-02_069.pdf.

14   *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America,* accessed October 1, 2021, https://ejournals.bc.edu/index.php/ctsa/issue/view/285.

15 Vatican, *Aetatis Novae*, 1992,
    https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pc
    cs_doc_22021992_aetatis_en.html.
16 Vatican, *Aetatis Novae.*
17 My thanks to Sherman Kuek for pointing this out to me in conversation.

THE GREAT DIGITAL CONTINENT:
The Intensifying Challenge of *Inter Mirifica*

Rev. Deacon Prof. Dr Sherman Kuek OFS

It may seem rather strange for a treatise on social communications to begin with a quote on the Second Vatican Council's document on the relation of the (Catholic) Church to non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*, but it is perhaps apt that we consider – from that document – why it is that "in our time…mankind is being drawn closer together, and the ties between different peoples are becoming stronger".[1] Certainly, there exists a multiplicity of factors that have caused the shrinking distance among members of the human family. The distance of which we speak is more than just spatial in nature, for it is also a distance in terms of communicative reachability, although the two aspects are not unrelated. The escalation of technological development has inevitably brought about progress in communication technology, among other forms of progress. In simple terms, this means that people are not just physically more proximate to one another in this day and age (as a result of urbanisation and globalisation), but they are also more communicatively accessible.

While the development of social communications during the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) was nowhere close to the state in which it exists today, the prophetic spirit was surely at work, and this resulted in the promulgation of *Inter Mirifica*, that is, the "Decree on the Media of Social Communications".[2] *Inter Mirifica* was one of the first two documents of the Council.[3] By "social communications", the Council Fathers were referring to "the press, movies, radio, television and the like" through which "news, views and teachings of every sort" could be disseminated at an unprecedented speed.[4] A cursory reading of the rest of the said document must necessarily provoke a curiosity on how far reaching the Council Fathers thought the implications of their ideas would have for

subsequent generations of the human society. Did they remotely anticipate that the day of the New Media would dawn just several decades years later? What they could have only projected by foresight, we who are alive today are able to assess on hindsight. True to the prophetic nature of the Church, we must necessarily appreciate the warnings of the Sacred Council that despite the potentials of social communications for the promotion of "the eternal welfare of Christians" and "the progress of all mankind", social communications also present prospects for "evil use".[5] Christians are exhorted to "instill a human and Christian spirit into these media" in order to "ensure the welfare of souls".

The primary concern of *Inter Mirifica* was, and is, the employment of social communications for the propagation of the Christian faith and the upholding of the common good of humanity. To these ends, the Second Vatican Council took it upon itself to instruct for apostolates specialised in social communications to be established and meaningfully sustained in dioceses worldwide in order that media of social communications could be employed for various "apostolic endeavors [sic]".[6] Under the pastoral supervision of bishops, the consciences of the faithful were to be properly formed on the moral use of such media for the purpose of providing "decent entertainment" as well as "bear[ing] witness to Christ".[7] Evidently, *Inter Mirifica* was as much a document about evangelisation as it was about social communications. I am not sure if the two dimensions of ecclesial life and the Church's missionary activity can even be divorced, but more of this shall be discussed anon.

The Democratisation of Social Communications

If the mission mandated by *Inter Mirifica* seemed like a mammoth one back then, the given task seems to have become all the more complex now because of the proliferation of communication platforms, both hardware and software. The sophistication of social communications is

now exacerbated by the invention of the internet and the very wide usership of the New Media. The New Media can rather simply be understood as forms of communications that are contingent upon the use of internet technology, which necessitates, then, that the two go hand in hand. To be sure, the development of the New Media, not to mention the internet itself, is by no means a mere accident. There is most certainly a group of powerful stakeholders in global society who are intentionally financing the development and propagation of these technologies, all for specific reasons and motives.[8] That they have heavily impacted the daily lives of the global population is not coincidental. Even where smaller players are emerging these days, they inadvertently become subservient to the corporate powers of the big players who eventually acquire these entrepreneurial institutions to integrate them into a larger technological infrastructural web. Facebook, taken as a case in point, acquired Instagram for USD1 billion in April 2012 and WhatsApp for USD19 billion by October 2014, these being only two among many of its other acquisitions over the years.[9] What such major corporations have achieved is a democratisation of social communications, or so it would seem, by placing power into the hands of billions of technological consumers worldwide to communicate with another at a personal level or to publish their ideas for the rest of the world. Far from being an altruistic venture, this deliberate democratisation, which has become exceedingly sophisticated in the past decade, is employed as a tool for exponential magnitudes of profitability on the part of those corporations who are in the game.

Even if such accessibility often seems to come at either no financial cost or, at most, a very low cost to its pedestrian users, it does not mean that it comes free of psychological, emotional, relational, and spiritual effects suffered by global society. In some cases, the ownership of specific forms of ostentatious hardware which enables ongoing accessibility to the New Media becomes a matter of social status and uncontrollably spirals into an unprecedented obsession. Shocking news pieces such as the one on Wang Shangkun, who sold his kidney at the age of 17 in order to buy an iPad and

an iPhone, would not have been heard of prior to the onset of such technological development.[10] Of course, one could contend that this was an atypical scenario. However, one could also argue that there are vast examples of other phenomena reflecting worrying effects of this technological proliferation in society. What was once a means of connecting people with one another has now become an accessible routine source of addictive behaviour for many people. People use it to work, study, shop, receive entertainment, and to keep abreast of the current news. As a result, its heavy socio-psychological impact has surfaced in the past couple of decades in the form of "cyberbullying, cybersuicide, cyberporn, cyber racism, social isolation, [and] internet addiction".[11]

> Excessive usage of internet addiction could be because the person is trying to escape loneliness, social anxiety or depression. Some of the emotional manifestations of internet addictions present as agitation, anxiety, depression, dishonesty, isolation, and inability to keep schedules, no sense of time, defensiveness and feelings of euphoria when in front of a computer!

> The physical side effects of internet addiction and spending too many hours in front of the screen understandably include headaches, backaches, and carpal tunnel syndrome, blurred or strained vision issues coupled with weight loss or gain.[12]

Together with the above, the excessive consumption of social media among the young people is said to have caused, or at least contributed to problems related to narcissistic tendencies. As young consumers are able to develop alter egos of themselves on social media platforms, their mental and emotional attention are invested excessively into presenting themselves in the ways they most desire through those platforms.[13] In practical terms, this means that many of them are living through their days in obsessive

search of the "likes" they desire to receive for their online posts. Their social media accounts become "shrines" at which they desire to see people "gather" to lavish praise and admiration on their cyber personas. Furthermore, research is also showing that ardent users of social media platforms are exhibiting significantly reduced levels of empathy, which means that they find themselves unable to effectively share the feelings of other people perhaps because their routine methods of communications are characterised by an absence of bodily presence and real-time facial expression. But just in case people misperceive that this phenomenon is unique to the young, middle-aged adults are not exempt as well, even if their choice of social media platforms may differ slightly.[14] It is quite telling that parents of young children who have themselves been consumers of social media have "reported a lack of 'positive character strengths'…such as self-control, honesty and humility…they see a lot of anger and hostility, along with arrogance and ignorance on social media sites".[15]

These effects arising from the democratised use of social communication platforms cannot be overlooked or understated in a world in which almost three billion people are active users of Facebook. While Facebook is by no means the only social media platform, it is being singled out in this essay because it is the most widely used platform with its users spending an average of almost 20 hours a month on it.[16] With that, let us not forget that this democratisation of social communications yields Facebook an advertising revenue of way over USD20 billion in just one quarter of a year.[17] The obvious priority on profits placed by the company over the psychological wellbeing of its users hardly needs to be pointed out, although the most recent claim made by whistleblower, Frances Haugen, against Facebook more than adequately highlights the issue at stake to the legislators: "The company's leadership knows how to make Facebook and Instagram safer but won't make the necessary changes because they have put their astronomical profits before people."[18]

However, it must be emphasised that circumstances are not all negative, for parents who are regular social media users have also reported "seeing content with a positive moral message at least once a day – including humour, appreciation of beauty, creativity, kindness, love and courage", all this being content that could have "a positive influence on young people's attitudes and behaviours".[19] This simply confirms the dictates of *Inter Mirifica* that the use of social communication tools requires a crucial moral choice on the part of both providers and users: to use it for the common good or for mere financial profitability. The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council were indeed right that global society needs to be conscientised for the preservation of decency in its use of instruments for social communications. We must bear in mind how complicated this challenge is considering the proportion of the world population that comprises routine users of New Media, the immoral (or at least amoral) cultural ideology that governs the worldview of many people today, and the waning sense of decency currently found in many societies. The efforts of the Church are necessarily tantamount to swimming against the cultural tide of human civilisation.

There are indeed times when the cultural tide threatens to overcome the Church itself. Members of the Church do not always seem to be standing firmly on the side of fidelity to the faith when it comes to their use – even exploitation – of social communication tools for the peddling of secular agenda that has hijacked their conscience. Reality becomes even more excruciating when claims that anti-Catholic beliefs are not antithetical to Catholic fidelity are blatantly broadcasted through media of social communications. Consider, for example, Catherine Pepinster, who was until December 2016 the editor of *The Tablet*, and who declared no peculiarity in being "a liberal and a Catholic" whilst also justifying her standing in the Church by claiming that "the Catholic faith makes more sense to me than anything else".[20] Consider another example of Rosemary Radford Ruether's 2008 publication of *Catholic Does Not Equal the Vatican: A Vision for Progressive Catholicism*, in which the author blames the late

Pope John Paul II for allegedly having become the stumbling block for a successful implementation of what she thinks is the Second Vatican Council's progressive vision for ecumenism, social justice, and modernism.[21] These examples are painfully telling of a faith community that is failing in its internal coherence, at least from the viewpoint of social communications. Social communications, whether or not we are in favour of the idea, is a transmission of signals that form public perceptions. And our transmission patterns are currently increasingly incoherent, to say the least, especially during the current pontificate of Pope Francis whose public actions often seem to contradict the very faith he is mandated to defend as the Successor of Peter.[22] I say this without denying that the Holy Father may have his internal reasoning for his courses of action on such matters; but from a media standpoint, this reasoning (if he does have one) is not immediately apparent, and therefore has been a cause of much confusion and alienation inflicted upon people seeking to be obedient children of the Catholic Church.

The Cultural Proprietorship of Social Communications

In correspondence with current reality, Daniel J. Castellano opines that the Christian community, specifically the Catholic Church, is rather far off from the fulfilment of the mandate of *Inter Mirifica* because of "clerical naivete and ignorance regarding the practical aspects of media, which prevented the articulation of a more definite course of action for implementing the decree".[23] To be fair, his submission was made almost a decade ago, and we can be certain that much progress has been made since then in this regard. But what remains true is that the undertaking of involvement in social communications, at global level, remains "dispersed among small-scale activities". This effectively means that the concerted investments and endeavours of humungous corporations has proven effective in their bid to exercise control over issues of religion, morality, and culture. It is no wonder that we are today increasingly confronted by a

media that is unabashedly hostile to Christianity, both as a religion and as a conglomerate of visible institutions. In the Catholic Church at least, until the worldwide hierarchy grasps the seriousness of this and is able to somehow garner the necessary resources to take the bull by its horns, the task of interaction with the media falls on the lay faithful; this is both an exciting prospect as well as a daunting challenge.

As for now, the astute observation of David S. Muthukumar is correct that there is a "deep disjuncture" between the institutional Church and the entire enterprise of social communications in the light of what he describes as the "media evolution".[24] Because the role of social communications media (under the control of profit-oriented corporations) has shifted over the decades from a mere platform for the passive reporting of simply *what is* to one of actively shaping the perceptions of society through the intentional crafting of its own pedagogy, the Church, together with all its good deeds, can and will be ignored by the reporting activity of the media except where she (that is, the Church) is deemed to have failed. To say that public perception towards the Christian faith and the institutions represented by her are at the mercy of the social communication media would be but a gross understatement. The main object of the media these days is, to repeat Muthukumar's term, "cultural determination". It was Malcolm Muggeridge who commented more than a century ago that "The media in general…are incomparably the greatest single influence in our society today", and this prophetic declaration has now become disproportionately evident.[25]

In the light of all this, it must therefore be clarified that what is construed to be a democratisation of social communications is actually not truly so after all. In truth, there is very much a monopoly at work in what has become an empire that is perhaps more powerful than any single government in existence. Democratisation of accessibility and use has been rendered possible only insofar as it does not stand in the way of the agenda of its proprietors, that is, "[p]rofit calculations,…the only motivational

factor for these corporate giants" even if the profits may not be procured directly from the individual consumer.[26] Where it suits their express purpose, the indiscriminate causation of cultural, moral, and religious degradation becomes a matter of subjective discretion. To this end, according to Chris Arthur, they have the power to create a "false consciousness" which propels consumers to "involve themselves collectively in destructive action as if they are doing the right thing".[27] An apt example of this would be the "[p]ortrayal of indiscriminate violence and overemphasis of entertainment" which renders consumers "numb to the dark realities around".[28] These are instances that *Inter Mirifica* describes as "caus[ing]…spiritual harm…or that can lead others into danger through base example, or that hinder desirable presentations and promote those that are evil".[29] Where art is no longer an imitation of life, but rather, the other way around, whither the common good? What of "decent amusement and cultural uplift"?[30]

Social Communications and the Evangelisation Mandate

And now, we come full circle. As Christians, we believe that God is a Being who communicates with us. If God created us for the purpose of communion, and if communications is a vehicle for communion, then communications must necessarily be a major concern for the faith community. In fact, God's revelation of Himself to us is *communication*. If we find ourselves powerless to direct, let alone control, the social communications empires of the world, we must at least intentionally participate in the influencing of social communications in a more concerted way in order that these platforms can be used to "bear witness to Christ".[31] Just to be clear, this speaks of the evangelising mission of the Church.

George Nwachukwu observes that the history of Christianity has, in antiquity, demonstrated astute employment of communication technology:

"For the Apostle Paul, it was the Roman Road system. For the Reformation, it was the Printing Press."[32] He goes on to submit that the opportunity to capitalise on the use of social communication platforms today is rendered even more possible because of its accessibility to grassroots individuals. He declares this, in echoing the voices of the recent popes, to be "an opportunity to be harnessed in the service of God and the Church". To be precise, this "opportunity" is described by the Holy Father, Pope Francis, as follows:

> The great digital continent not only involves technology but is made up of real men and women who bring with them their hopes, their suffering, their concerns and their pursuit of what is true, beautiful and good. We need to bring Christ to others, through these joys and hopes…[33]

However, this may be undertaken effectively only if we "strive to instill [sic] a human and Christian spirit into these media, so that they may fully measure up to the great expectations of mankind and to God's design".[34] This task has become all the more compelling now, considering that the availability of the plethora of social communication platforms informs us that they are no longer mere alternatives, or optional, means of reaching people, but rather, the main method of communication. These platforms are contemporary equivalents of Saint Paul's *Via Egnatia* and Martin Luther's Printing Press. It is mainly through social communication platforms that ideation takes place and ideologies are formed.[35] The culture of the day is *digital* in character, and platforms such as electronic mail, WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, among a host of others, are expressions of this culture.

The recent onset of the Covid-19 pandemic has evidently brought about a heightened use of social communication platforms globally to reach the Christian masses so as to enable them to remain connected with their various faith communities in worship, devotions, and teaching. Various

churches, for example, have begun live-streaming their weekly services. While this phenomenon is not without its own pitfalls and challenges, we may surmise that the pandemic has accelerated the inevitable. What remains lacking is a more concerted, streamlined, and well-thought-out endeavour rather than a kneejerk response to our empty churches. Given the times, this response has certainly not been unwarranted; but this too requires further consideration, collaboration, and intentional strategising in order that our evangelisation efforts bear positive fruit. The time has come for us to enable the Word to be incarnated digitally for those who would otherwise have never encountered this Word in the flesh. While this digital incarnation is ultimately insufficient, it is a necessary starting point in the light of the times.

The point of this article is not to impart the "how", but simply to emphasise the imperative of a concerted strategy for entering into the digital sphere. In dealing with the "how", Pope Francis has stipulated clearly in his address at the plenary assembly of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications in September 2013, "priests, religious and laity must have a thorough and adequate formation" on the effective and competent use of social communication technology.[36]

As has been pointed out earlier in this essay, the wide practice of social communications is certainly not devoid of its due pitfalls. I have already explained, for example, that the lack of physical proximity enables a user to hide behind a degree of anonymity such that he can construct a digital persona for himself which almost totally contradicts who he is as a real person. Furthermore, a potentially obsessive integration into this digital world takes a psychological, mental, and emotional toll on a user, who eventually finds himself struggling to be present to people who physically surround him. This risk of a divide between one's virtual life and one's physical life was already noted by Pope Benedict XVI during his pontificate despite his acknowledgement that a keen involvement in social communications was not optional.[37] It follows, therefore, that the required

formation for all clergy, religious, and laity in their engagement with the digital culture constitutes more than mere technical skill competence, but also formation in personhood and authenticity. Lest these potential pitfalls constitute a justification for our rejection of digital involvement as a legitimate method of evangelisation, we need to be clear that there is no method of evangelisation that is truly safe from inherent dangers. Even the regular feeding of the People of God with the Eucharist in our liturgical celebrations always poses a danger of desecration when no reasonable precautions are set in motion. Hence, the suggested formation in personhood must highlight a compulsory awareness as exhorted by Pope Francis in his message for the World Day of Communications in 2016: "It is not technology which determines whether or not communication is authentic, but rather the human heart and our capacity to use wisely the means at our disposal."[38]

Besides the reasons I have expounded in this article on why it is such a compelling imperative that we should engage social communication platforms for the purpose of evangelisation, there is one other, perhaps, most compelling reason for doing so. In doing everything that He could to communicate with mankind in the most powerful possible way at a time when the digital continent did not exist, God did the unthinkable: He communicated most clearly to us by becoming Man.

NOTES

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5 Point 2, *Inter Mirifica.*

6 Point 13, *Inter Mirifica.*

7 Point 13 & 14, *Inter Mirifica.*

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CHRISTIAN ETHICS OF COMMUNICATION:
Perspectives from Behavioural Science

Doulos Paul Lee[1]

"Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer" Psalm 19:14 (ESV).[2]

There are at least two purposes for communication. First, to inform or to convey knowledge. Second, to persuade, which could include the intention of changing behaviour. Often, they come together.

Communication today is tricky. We live in a world where information is in abundance and can be obtained almost instantaneously. This brings many benefits but there are also downsides as well as challenges. The sheer volume of information can be overwhelming and that matter of what is true and what is false becomes an issue of increasing importance.[3]

Amidst this, I would humbly like to offer some thoughts, by drawing insights from behavioural science, to help us reflect and think critically on this issue of the Christian ethic of communication. In doing so, I will also draw mainly from empirical research and refer to contemporary developments (that is, the COVID-19 pandemic) as a key point of reference.[4]

First, Seek to Be Helpful

First and foremost, as Christians, we must speak the truth. We have a heavy responsibility to bear. As what has been revealed in Matthew 12:36-37, ultimately, we are all to give an account of what we say, and this is truly something that we should take heed:

I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned (ESV).

Therefore, we cannot lie or mislead others for doing so will have significant consequences for us. In speaking the truth, Scripture also says that we need to do so appropriately. For if one speaks the truth and stumbles others, one has not handled truth with sufficient care. Further, if we speak the truth but do so sloppily or in a manner that is unclear, we are not doing proper justice to the message. Hence, in speaking the truth, we should also aim to be helpful to our audience.

During the pandemic, public health communication was critical in ensuring that people were aware and understand the nature and risks of the virus as well as how they should behave in the light of this information.[5] For example, washing hands properly, avoiding shaking hands, and observing physical distancing. While these efforts seem to be simple and common sense, in reality, much of its success is due to a lot of experimentation in implementing principles for behavioural change.[6] These principles build on our understanding of how people process information and move from knowledge (intention) to action.

For the purposes of this essay, let me illustrate two findings in relation to this issue here – framing effect and cognitive load.

The way we present information is important and can affect people's behaviour.[7] This is called the framing effect. For example, a classic study found that framing medical treatment in terms of probability of dying versus probability of living affected people's choices even though objectively, both are the inverse of the other.[8] In another example, presenting statistical information to jurors in different formats led to

different percentages of guilty verdicts.[9] Also take for example news about the pandemic – more than 224 million people testing positive for COVID-19 and more than 4.6 million lives lost to the virus.[10] While these numbers indicate that the impact of the pandemic is significant, most of us will find it hard to relate and comprehend what these numbers really represent.[11] Compare this to a story from someone we know who went through a harrowing experience. Even for this, the way in which the story is told could have differing impact on our perception of the risk of the virus. Risks can appear to be larger or smaller depending on how it is framed.[12] Hence, it is important to note that the way information is presented can influence important decisions and the way we perceive reality.

The second concept is cognitive load. Modern living is busy and hectic; we are perpetually "connected". Some have found connection between usage of these smart devices to be related to lower mental well-being.[13] More relevant for the discussion here is that many studies have also demonstrated that when our minds are occupied (meaning high cognitive load), we make decisions automatically instead of relying on conscious and effortful deliberation.[14] While in many areas this may be adaptive, for some tasks, this is associated with decrease in accuracy of judgments and quality of decisions. This is especially true for complex decisions.

While the overriding ethical consideration for Christians is to speak the truth, knowing how to *most effectively communicate those truths* should also be an equally important imperative for Christians. Both the framing effect and cognitive load reveals to us that the communicator is in a position of influence and authority, and hence, has the duty of care to ensure the truthfulness of the message. Since teachers will be judged more severely (as stated in Scripture), those with the power and influence have serious ethical responsibilities.[15] Knowing how individuals may be susceptible to certain biases means that it is the duty of the communicator to not take advantage of it. Instead, we should view it from the perspective of finding the best way

to frame the message in a way that is truthful and helpful. The framing effect reveals to us the ethical imperative to not distort the truth.

Furthermore, the issue of cognitive load also reinforces the duty of the communicator to be helpful in the way the message is communicated. This means putting across the message clearly and simply without diluting the truthfulness of the message. No doubt there are certain issues which are complex, but understanding that there are limitations to our ability to process information is important to consider. This is especially pertinent if the goal of communication is to change behaviour.

In summary, in an age where information is so readily available and we suffer from information overload rather than a lack of information, it is important for the Christian communicator to ensure that the message he is conveying is not only truthful, but also framed in a way that is helpful. The information should also be conveyed clearly and simply. Although there are many other psychological factors which may be helpful, understanding the two factors above is a useful first step and is important in reflecting on the ethics of communication.

Second, Consider How to Best Love Your Neighbour

We may like to think that we make decisions rationally and dispassionately, or that our minds work in a way that is similar to a computer.[16] We may also like to think that information, awareness and education is sufficient for us to behave optimally. Having information or even having the intention to do something does not necessarily translate into action. This is known as the intention-action gap.[17] Notably, we can see this gap in studies on adopting positive behaviours such as healthy living. An example over the past year was in the United Kingdom, where more than half of those with COVID-19 symptoms did not isolate due to the inability to do so (because of reasons such as domestic responsibilities

and financial need) despite being motivated to isolate.[18] Thus, having the intention or information to act is insufficient. Other factors matter.

Consider the example of how mask wearing has become so pervasive in most places around the world. During this period, there was considerable uncertainty and lack of consensus on the effectiveness of mask wearing and the nature of the virus. So then, one might wonder as to what drove this behavioural change given that we can also observe that in some places, mask wearing has become a politically divisive issue.[19] A potential answer could be the role of social norms and how such a behaviour can be a powerful signal that one is responsible and is compliant with civic norms.[20] It is well established that people are motivated to adhere to behavioural norms of groups that they belong to and care about.[21] Ultimately, this desire to follow norms comes from our desire to belong to a larger community. These behaviours mark which groups we belong to and not only shape our behaviour but also how we understand, interact and relate with other people. Here, a distinction can be made between what we think people are doing versus what we think people should be doing.

Many policymakers have used these behavioural insights to induce positive behaviour across a broad spectrum of areas including health, financial well-being and encouraging sustainable consumption. For example, informing people on how their energy consumption relates to that of their neighbours, along with messages on the importance of sustainability, has led to positive change of behaviour.[22] Therefore, communicating social norms, and also what the desirable behaviour is, can influence behaviour positively. Here, some have found that persuading people about the socially responsible thing to do is easier to frame when the behaviour is not uncommon (for example, "many people are voting, so you should do so" as opposed to "not many are voting but it is your responsibility as a citizen"). Thus, we can see that our behaviour is not solely driven by our own individual will or desire. It is shaped by our

perception of what the right behaviour is and what other people are actually doing.

I highlight the above to show that inasmuch as we would like to think that our behaviour is our own and shaped only by what we think, it is very much the opposite. Our behaviour does have a knock-on effect on others, especially if they are within our "in-group" (that is, a group that we and the other person belong to). The impact includes those directly on the receiving end of the action and also more widely on behavioural norms. For example, if one verbally abuses another, one might bring about the *actual* impact of causing psychological harm in addition to creating or reinforcing the group norm that such abuse is acceptable or "normal".

Hence, applying what is taught in Scripture, we must keep in mind that we do not stumble others in anything that we do and say.[23] This flows from the imperative in Scripture for us to love our neighbour as we love ourselves.[24] Taking this into context, what we have considered so far brings to light that ethically, we must consider the impact our behaviour and communication will have on others. We need to consider how our words and actions will affect our "neighbour", beyond ourselves. In the Romans 14 passage, the Apostle Paul exhorts believers to not stumble other believers but to "pursue what makes for peace and mutual uplifting".[25]

Extending this, there are also positive implications in the ways in which we can help other brothers and sisters in Christ in their faith journey. For example, do not underestimate the value of letting them know what the desired behaviour is (because it is in accordance with Scripture and is pleasing to God) and doing so in a clear manner repeatedly. Acknowledging that our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ are in the same community as us (which is the Church) can further encourage them to change or follow the desired behaviour. These principles for behavioural change can also apply to helping people to avoid behaving undesirably, which, in this case, is to help encourage believers to turn away from sin. It can also strengthen

trust and help them feel supported and encouraged in their journey of faith. In fact, there is some evidence that framing messages in terms of group or collective action is more effective than framing it in terms of individual response.[26] These are practical ways in which we can support each other in our faith journey. In fact, as we are going through a very challenging time during this pandemic and during times of trials and suffering, having the comfort and assurance that God is with us and that our fellow brothers and sisters are journeying alongside us is a great source of strength and encouragement.

In summary, an important ethical principle for communication is to consider the impact of our words and actions on our neighbour. As Christians, the freedom that we have is not in acting and speaking in whatever manner we wish to; our freedom comes from being in Christ and being saved from eternal death. In fact, being followers of Christ, we are to act and speak in a manner that is worthy and pleasing to God.[27]

Third, Seek to Be Gracious and Humble

The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, exhorts them to be humble and consider others as more important as themselves.[28] Scripture also shows clearly that God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.[29] Therefore, how does this relate to the way in which we are to speak to others?

This exhortation in Scripture is a corrective to how we make judgments in real life. We tend to be more "gracious" to ourselves than to others. Psychologists call this the "fundamental attribution error". We are quick to judge others and are generous when it comes to our own failures. For example, when we fail in an examination, we might attribute this to its difficulty or because of things that are beyond our control, which could include feeling unwell on the day we took the examination. However, when

it comes to others, we may judge that they failed because they are lazy to study, incompetent or lacking in intelligence. Hence, when others fail, it is due to a flaw in their personality or character. But when we fail, we are not at fault because we were experiencing extenuating circumstances. Therefore, we fail to be gracious to others and we are quick to judge. We do not consider that they may have failed because of external circumstances. We judge first before we seek to understand and we do so from a default position that we are superior and, perhaps, blameless.

As Christians, this should not be the case. As the passage in Philippians indicates, we are to consider others greater than ourselves. This does not mean that we are naïve. This also does not deny the possibility that the other person may have failed because he has been lazy. However, the attribution error is referring to our intuition and inclination to jump quickly to judging others less generously than ourselves. The passage in Philippians does not indicate that we accept everything others say uncritically; rather, it is a position of not thinking of ourselves as more important, more intelligent or more morally upright than others. This is an attitude of superiority that stems from pride. Reading on from verses 6 to 8 of the chapter, the Apostle Paul provides the motivation for adopting this position of humility, pointing out to us that Christ humbled Himself by coming as a man and dying on the cross for us.

As Christians, when we think of ourselves as higher than others in our speech and actions, we have to also remember that we are sinners who have been redeemed only by the grace and mercy of God.[30] Therefore, we have no right to think of ourselves as greater than others. Although the attribution error indicates that we are inclined to be quick to judge others, we are not hostage to this for we have been redeemed, and through the Holy Spirit, we are able to change by God's grace and strength.

Practically speaking, this means that we are not quick to judge, and we are to show grace, mercy and kindness to others. Seek to show them the love of Christ as He has shown it to us.

The need for us to be thoughtful, gracious and kind to others is especially pertinent during this challenging time. As the pandemic has significantly impacted the economic well-being and physical health of many people, we must remember that many have been suffering mentally. Most of the world has had to endure lockdowns, having to isolate ourselves physically from others. The evidence is clear that physical isolation from others, especially our loved ones and family, can have negative psychological impact.[31] Social isolation has been shown to be related to deterioration of well-being, even leading to substance abuse.[32] The impact of these could persist for years even after lockdowns are lifted and the pandemic is beyond us. Further, the stress from isolation could worsen existing mental health issues faced by vulnerable groups.[33] This is not to mention the mental health impact of the pandemic on our healthcare workers who are experiencing burnout, anxiety and even depression.[34]

Therefore, let us reach out to those in need. Support those who are especially feeling isolated. Help them to maintain some routine and social support. Let us be a light to others and show them the love of Christ.

Conclusion

The Christian ethics to communication is simple yet profound. It grounds itself on the person and character of Christ. Upon this foundation, we know that we are to speak the truth in love, showing grace to others and adopt a posture of humility. Our words reflect who we are, and ultimately, who we belong to. Let us heed the words in Ephesians 4:29: "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for

building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear" (ESV).

NOTES

[1] The views expressed in this article are of the authors and does not represent the views of any other organisations he is affiliated with.
[2] The English Standard Version of the Bible shall be abbreviated as ESV in this essay.
[3] What people call the "fake news" phenomenon.
[4] In this essay, I will use communication and speech interchangeably.
[5] All these focused on changing people's behaviour to reduce chances of infection.
[6] Ensuring that communication is easy to understand and to act on, simple, short and repeated.
[7] Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, "The framing of decisions and the psychology of choice", in *Behavioral Decision Making* (Boston, MA: Springer, 1985), 25-41.
[8] Barbara J. McNeil, Stephen G. Pauker, Harold C. Sox Jr, and Amos Tversky, "On the elicitation of preferences for alternative therapies", *New England Journal of Medicine* 306, no. 21 (1982): 1259-62.
[9] Samuel Lindsey, Ralph Hertwig, and Gerd Gigerenzer, "Communicating statistical DNA evidence", *Jurimetrics* 43 (2002): 147.
[10] John Hopkins University & Medicine Coronavirus Resource Center, September 14, 2021, https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/.
[11] Pablo J. Barrio, Daniel G. Goldstein, and Jake M. Hofman, "Improving comprehension of numbers in the news", in *Proceedings of the 2016 Chi Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (New York, NY: Association for Computing Machinery, 2016), 2729-39.
[12] Ellen Peters, P. Sol Hart, and Liana Fraenkel, "Informing patients: the influence of numeracy, framing, and format of side effect information on risk perceptions", *Medical Decision Making* 31, no. 3 (2011): 432-6.
[13] Jon D. Elhai, Robert D. Dvorak, Jason C. Levine, and Brian J. Hall, "Problematic Smartphone Use: A Conceptual Overview and Systematic Review of Relations with Anxiety and Depression Psychopathology", *Journal of Affective disorders* 207 (2017): 251-9.
[14] Daniel T. Gilbert and Randall E. Osborne, "Thinking Backward: Some Curable and Incurable Consequences of Cognitive Busyness", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 57, no. 6 (1989): 940.
[15] James 3:1

[16]   The assumption that people make decisions rationally and dispassionately is akin to the idea of people as rational and *homo economicus*. Also, assuming that our minds work in a way that is similar to a computer is called the computational theory of mind.

[17]   Paschal Sheeran and Thomas L. Webb, "The Intention-Behavior Gap", *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 10, no. 9 (2016): 503-18.

[18]   Christina Atchison, Leigh Robert Bowman, Charlotte Vrinten, Rozlyn Redd, Philippa Pristerà, Jeffrey Eaton, and Helen Ward, "Early Perceptions and Behavioural Responses During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Cross-Sectional Survey of UK Adults", *BMJ Open* 11, no. 1 (2021): e043577.

[19]   It is associated with the issues of responsibility as opposed to freedom of choice.

[20]   Sean D. Young and Noah J. Goldstein, "Applying Social Norms Interventions to Increase Adherence to COVID-19 Prevention and Control Guidelines", *Preventive Medicine* 145 (2021): 106424. There are various definitions of what "social norms" is, but for this paper, I will be using a simple and all-inclusive definition whereby social norms refers to the descriptive and prescriptive behaviour of a group that one belongs to.

[21]   Margaret E. Tankard and Elizabeth Levy Paluck, "Norm Perception As a Vehicle for Social Change", *Social Issues and Policy Review* 10, no. 1 (2016): 181-211.

[22]   Elisha R. Frederiks, Karen Stenner, and Elizabeth V. Hobman, "Household Energy Use: Applying Behavioural Economics to Understand Consumer Decision-making and Behaviour", *Renewable and Sustainable Energy Reviews* 41 (2015): 1385-94.

[23]   Romans 14:13-23

[24]   Leviticus 19:18

[25]   Romans 14:19

[26]   Holly Carter, John Drury, Richard Amlôt, G. James Rubin, and Richard Williams, "Perceived Responder Legitimacy and Group Identification Predict Cooperation and Compliance in a Mass Decontamination Field Exercise", *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 35, no. 6 (2013): 575-85.

[27]   Ephesians 4:1

[28]   Philippians 2:3-8

[29]   James 4:6

[30]   Romans 5:8-11

[31]   Troy Day, Andrew Park, Neal Madras, Abba Gumel, and Jianhong Wu, "When is Quarantine a Useful Control Strategy for Emerging Infectious Diseases?" *American Journal of Epidemiology* 163, no. 5 (2006): 479-85.

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CONSTRUCTIVE USE OF COMMUNICATION

Annie Ling

Every day, on social media, as we open our WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Tik Tok, we are bombarded with all kinds of messages and video clips on different things from friends, acquaintances and our different social groups and communities. Some messages are about issues in our communities and residential areas, or among our friends, family members and ex-colleagues. They can be about what people are experiencing or doing in their day-to-day life or discussions about politics, Covid-19 cases, or other matters. We relate to and communicate all these gestures and intentions through words, messages, pictures and videos, as well as meet real time through Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams and Video calls. We participate in this vast web or ecosystem of communication and connection by viewing the content of the messages, responding to them and sharing them with others. They have become part and parcel of our everyday life, replacing our physical "hellos", smiles, handshakes, and hugs when we meet on the street.

Communication plays a central role in our lives. It is the sole form of interaction between people. Communication gives us life and puts a smile on our faces and hearts. In communicating, we participate and actively engage and connect with others. We are relational beings who thrive by connecting with others. As human beings, we are gifted with relational capacities to make successful communication. We are a force in our community, in our family and the world that we are in, through the way that we communicate and through our way of being when we communicate with others. Through communication, we can foster growth and empower others as well as ourselves in our relationships and our community. Great communication can enrich us, give us life and make our lives more fulfilling. However, there can be disrupting elements in

communication that affect us and give us stress, creating tension in our relational life.

Communication Interaction Dynamics

There are many dynamics that are involved in our seemingly simple daily communications. Let us observe some of the elements that influence our communication and be aware of how we are communicating. There are four dimensions in this communication interaction that I would like to highlight:

1. The person/persons we are communicating with;
2. "Me" in the communication;
3. Our messages in communication; and
4. The situation and context of the communication.

We will look at each of the four, how they influence and affect the way we communicate, the message that we give and the different circumstances in which the message is given.

1. The Person/Persons We are Communicating With

The "person" we are communicating may include individuals or groups or communities, our family members, or our spouses. The way the person receives our communication, as we perceive it, can have an effect or bearing on the way that we may respond and communicate.

In interactive communication, the way the person responds as we express our thoughts or feelings, that is, by nodding or looking at us while we are speaking or actively listening to us, through the person's body language when we are communicating face to face, or through the person's

quick appropriate responses to our WhatsApp messages, we may sense that we are well received by the person. The person's responsiveness triggers the encouragement and openness within us to further develop and engage in communication. We may feel a sense of being heard, seen and accepted by the person we are communicating with, a sense of belonging, and that we are well-received within the group. We feel alive and happy in the communication, and this fosters good communication and relationships.

For example, we are tasked to organise an event in the group that we are with. Members in the group enthusiastically responded to our request for help and contribute ideas for the event. We feel that our requests are well received by others because they are eager to participate. The eager responses and help make us feel accepted in the role that we have been given, and their participation gives us a sense of belonging in the group and affirms our relational and organising skills. We feel happy and motivated to work with them to make the event successful.

However, if we sense that people (especially significant persons in our life and circle of friends) ignore us by not replying to our WhatsApp messages in a timely manner or do not look at us when we are speaking, it may trigger a certain reaction in us. For some, this may trigger a reaction of frustration, anger, hurt or fear of being ignored, being unimportant or a sense of rejection. The reaction can vary from mild to strong and can greatly influence the way we communicate to the detriment of the relationship. If our requests for help in the group were ignored, and no one responded to our message or took up any role for the event, we would tend to feel rejected and ignored, and we would start to doubt our communication and leadership capacity in the group. We would feel disappointed and stop trying to make the event happen. We might even leave the group as a response.

2. "Me" in the Communication
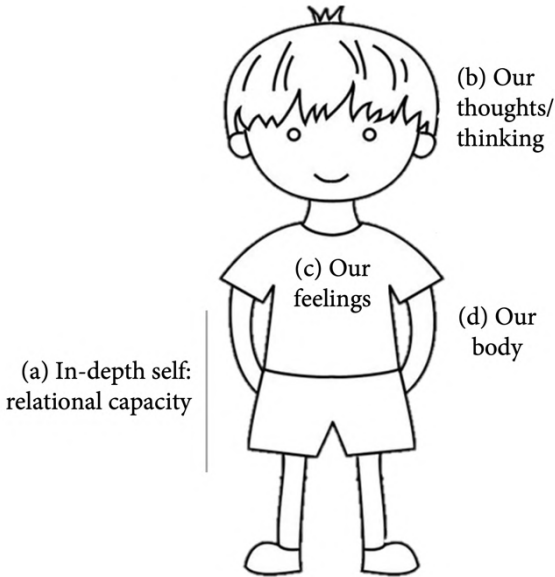
When we communicate, we communicate as whole persons. We need to observe our inner disposition before communicating with the other person. We observe our inner disposition in these areas:

a. our relational capacities;
b. our thoughts and thinking;
c. our feelings; and
d. the way our body may feel or speak.

We shall look at each of these elements in our inner disposition when communicating.

a) Our relational capacities. We are all gifted individuals with different relational gifts for communication, each uniquely different from others, yet possessing some similar gifts with different hues and flavours. Some

examples of such relational capacity are as follows: respect for others, love for others, care for others, the ability to listen, the capacity to share, humour, compassion and empathy, and genuine openness, among others. These qualities enable us to participate well by contributing and fostering great communication with others.

Our relational capacity can help foster great and positive communication. When we have respect for other persons or for our community, we can live this respect in our communication and interaction with others. Our gift of respect comes to life in our way of relating and receiving others without judgement and in an open sincere manner when relating with them. Another example of this is the gift of our kindness towards others. This gift comes to life in our way of communicating our support and encouragement to others who are going through a difficult time. Yet another example is the gift of humour. If we have the gift of humour, we are able to live this humour with others through the way we communicate in situations or events in a light-hearted, funny manner, which allows for a hearty laugh and enables enjoyable connections with our loved ones, friends and community. In many other wonderful ways, we can live our uniqueness and our relational gifts with others when we communicate by offering the best of ourselves, fostering respect, camaraderie and love. Exercising and living our relational gifts with others during communication helps to nurture and grow our relationships in a positive and healthy way.

Invitation to reflect on your relational capacities: Observe your relational capacities. What are aspects of your giftedness that can help and build your communication with others? Is it your love for others, your kindness, your care for others, your being a good listener, your openness towards others, your joy, or your humour? Name these aspects.

b) *Our thoughts and our thinking*. Our thoughts and thinking capacity is another area that can influence our communication with others. Our

thoughts about a situation, our perception of the person whom we are communicating with, our understanding of what is happening in a situation, and our understanding of the background of the person we are communicating with can help us plan our choices of words and phrases to be used in the intended message to convey our thoughts on the situation. This helps us to communicate in an efficient, coherent and effective manner.

Likewise, if we perceive or think of situations or circumstances in an unfavorable or negative way, then our thoughts can cause us to have a biased view, influencing our choice of words and presentation of the message in the communication. This way of communicating can be damaging to the party concerned and the relationship.

Invitation to reflect on your way of communicating: What are you thinking? What is your understanding and perception of the situation or message that you have received? Your choice of words reflects what you believe: are they kind, and are they true? Can you craft positive messages that are in line with who you are, out of love for the other and your community?

c) *Our feelings.* Besides our thoughts, our feelings also play a part in our communication. The way we feel about certain situations, persons or circumstances influences the way we communicate as well. When we feel happy, humourous or estatic, we reflect it through our choice of words in order to express how we feel. Our feelings are also communicated through the tone that we may use in communication. For example, when we are happy, we might use words like "delighted", "great" or "wonderful". Also, we may add a happy emoji in our messages to reflect our feelings. Our mood is communicated through our choice of words and emoji, and this can promote an open, positive, friendly and happy environment for communicating and relating. Likewise, when we are upset, angry or sad, it is reflected through our choice of words, which may be strong, demanding

or accusatory. The tone of the message may seem harsh, and likewise, the choices of emojis that accompany our messages.

Invitation to reflect on your way of communicating: What are you feeling at the moment about the message you have just received or about your communication with the person before you? Are you happy, joyful and ecstatic, or are you feeling upset, hurt, sad, disappointed or angry at the message that you have received? What is the tone of the message that you are about to send or speak: is it kind and encouraging, or is it hurtful, angry and condescending? What would be an appropriate way to respond without getting too emotional or demanding or exaggerated (which refers to a response that is more than necessary and seems out of proportion). Observe what you feel inside before you respond.

d) *The way our body may feel or speak.* Our bodies too, speak in our communication. The way our body feels can influence our communication. A well-rested and energetic body can allow one to feel positive, up-beat, happy and patient, and this can positively influence our way of communicating. When we are well rested, we might observe that we have sufficient energy and clarity to manage our way of responding to communication from others. We might be less affected by messages that we read or receive.

A tired and stressed body as a result of a lack of sleep, too much work or stress from relationships may influence the temperament of a person, and therefore, affect his or her way of communicating. Also, bodies that are unwell or sick (for example, headaches or aching bodies) can affect our temperament when relating with others. When we are tired, we might be easily upset or impatient while conversing with other people. Perhaps, when we are not in the right frame of mind because of tiredness, we should restrain ourselves from reading too many messages that may trigger discomfort or irritation in us, which would lead to loss of temper or frustration.

Invitation to reflect on how your body "speaks" in communication: Listen to your body. Are you feeling tired at the moment? Is there an unease in yourself (for example, a headache) or are you feeling good, well rested and energetic? Observe the way your body speaks and how that affects your communication.

3) Our Messages in Communication

The "messages" that we give to others, that is, by our choice of words and phrases, as well as the tone, allows a message to be received by the other party accurately and as intended. Good and clearly communicated messages foster understanding and reduce misunderstanding caused by incomplete and unclear communication.

When we send a message or communicate with another person, we should observe the following aspects of our message:

- Is our message clear, concise and well structured? When we do short messaging (for example, through WhatsApp), we tend to use short forms and emoji to convey our messages. The lack of the visual aspect during the interaction and an overly concise message may cause incomplete understanding on the part of the recipient of the message. This can create some frustration and misunderstanding over messages received.

- These days, we are trying to adjust to new ways of communication through virtual platforms like Zoom, Google Meet, or Skype for team meetings and conversations. We can often find that our communication is not so smooth, and this may cause us to feel a little anxious, stressed or uncomfortable in front of the telephone or laptop when trying to work around the technology and connectivity problems. This may affect the way our messages are structured, and

therefore, the clarity of the intended message, potentially resulting in confusion and misunderstanding.

- We should observe our way of communicating. Do we stay on topic in conversations or do we get easily swayed and sidetracked?

4) The Situation and Context of the Communication

Awareness of the situation or context of the communication can greatly foster good relationships when it leads to conversations being held in a warm, friendly, respectful, open and fair manner. This way of communication strengthens the bonds of relationships and the unity of a community. Communication in difficult situations that need to be dealt with should be conducted in a fair and respectful manner.

Let us observe some elements that we need to take into consideration when communicating:

a) *Place.* We should observe the place where the communication is taking place. There are many chat groups (on our mobile devices) created today with our family, friends and community. Some chat groups are purely for everyday conversations that are informal, relaxed and fun. We also have community-related chat groups (for example, residential groups, religious groups, eco-friendly groups, pet groups, or baking groups) where chats are less formal and directed more specifically at the interest of the group. Also, we have business-only chat groups with our colleagues or business partners; the tone and messages of such groups are more specific and formal. We need to adjust our communication in accordance with the type of chat group we are in. Our way of communicating should be in keeping with the nature of the group (for example, business only, family only, or serious bakers only), and we should observe the specific rules and ways of communication that are proper to the group. For example, we should

communicate only formal business- or economic-related news and trends with business chat groups. In such chat groups, any other communications such as jokes and "good morning" greetings are usually considered out of place, and therefore, improper.

b) *Condition.* The condition of other persons and ourselves when we are communicating can affect our communication. In observing our feelings, are we upset, too excited, relaxed, happy or stressed during the communication? What about the people we are communicating with: are we aware of how they are feeling? Are they to hold the conversation, or does one of us perhaps need to calm down before we can continue with the conversation? Understanding the condition of other persons when communicating is important especially when dealing with a difficult matter. This can help to ensure good communication, which could otherwise have easily spiraled out of control.

c) *Time and Context.* We also need to observe the time and context of communication especially during difficult conversations. We need to be aware of the appropriate times to talk about certain topics, perhaps when both parties in a conversation are not too busy, as a lack of time may cause both parties to feel rushed. Topics that are considered important or heavy need to be given due time and space, for example, when relaying or sharing important decisions that we have made which may have consequences on others, or discussing difficult family issues or difficult health issues. We should also note the context and place of a conversation. Perhaps a private chat, or a telephone call, is better than communicating in a chat group; or perhaps a coffee session at a neutral and quiet location is more conducive than communicating over WhatsApp or Zoom, considering the nature of the discussion.

This way of thoughtful communication helps a difficult message to be conveyed in an appropriate manner, taking into consideration the wellbeing of the people we are communicating with. It can help to minimise

difficulties that may arise from misunderstanding. We may need to plan beforehand a suitable time and space with the relevant persons in mind. This can lead to meaningful communication and the strengthening of the bond between the two parties involved despite the difficult conversation that takes place.

The description above shows us that the inner disposition of the whole person can greatly influence our way of communicating. The way we think or perceive a situation, our emotional state, and the way our body speaks can influence the outcome of our communication. We should also note how other people receive and respond to our messages, how it can affect our inner disposition and how we too may respond positively or negatively. The messages that we communicate to others by our choice of clear and well-structured words and phrases, with an appropriate tone, allow our messages to be receive as intended by other parties in a way that fosters growth in our relationships. Also, allowing for conversations to take place in their appropriate situations or contexts allows for communication to be warm and friendly, and therefore, greatly fosters good relationships.

Managing Difficult Challenges in Communication

As shared earlier, we can use social media to our great advantage. We can foster and build relationships through distance and time, especially with our loved ones during a difficult time like pandemic. However, there can also often be difficult moments in communication that can lead to strained relationships, even ending certain relationships, when these difficulties are not managed well. Our fingers and minds may be too quick to respond, thus leading to uncomfortable and tense communication.

When engaging in communication, especially with people who are important to us, we may find that something is triggered in us when we feel, for example, that our messages are being ignored, or when people are taking

too long to respond to our questions, or when people are being rude to us. This should lead us to ask ourselves what it is we are actually feeling. This feeling that is triggered in us could be anger, irritation, disappointment, hurt, fear or a sense of rejection in being ignored. If we respond in anger, or in tit-for-tat fashion, we may end up remaining silent or ignoring the reply we receive, or even leaving the chat group all together.

Therefore, before responding to the unpleasant situation, we should pause. We should allow ourselves a few moments to distance ourselves from the situation in order to calm down. We can also take a moment to read the message again to better understand it. In the process of reading it, we can ask ourselves questions to further understand and clarify its content, the situation or circumstances in which the message has been written, and perhaps also the condition of the person writing the message (for example, he or she could be upset or stressed, or perhaps, simply have made a typographical error).

Subsequently, we can figure out the best way to respond to such an unpleasant message. It can be done in a way that manages the relationship through healthy communication. We can choose to respond with love, care and kindness towards those who have hurt us through such messages. When we are able to situate ourselves in this love, care and kindness, we will better reflect on the way that we can choose to respond by considering how to phrase a response that is both truthful to who we are and gentle and affirming towards the other person. We also have to consider the most appropriate situation and context for communicating our response to the other person. If we have received the message through a chat group, it might be better to offer a response privately. A telephone call after office hours, for example, or at another time that is more suitable, might ensure that this delicate communication can be managed unhurriedly and given due attention.

In such situations, we have a choice to either communicate from our hearts or allow ourselves to respond based on the difficult feelings that are triggered. In desiring to foster good relationships through constructive communication, we are invited to live out our relational capacities and gifts when we are faced with difficult communication. It helps when we realise that we have a tendency to react towards messages that we receive, especially messages that unsettle us and cause uncomfortable feelings in us. We can take our time to calm down, situate ourselves and communicate the best of ourselves.

We need to practise this more often if we still find ourselves challenged when reacting to difficult messages that we receive. If it persists, we can seek accompaniment from trained accompanists to help us understand and work on the issue so that we can eventually overcome this difficulty.

Truly, we have a choice in the way we foster constructive communication with others. We can build, inspire and empower others through a positive and wonderful way of communicating. Let our communication inspire life and growth in ourselves, in our relationships and in our communities!

COMMUNICATING RESPONSIBLY THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

Dr Pauline Pooi Yin Leong

The Internet is a worldwide system of inter-connected computer networks that enables people to share information and communicate with one another. This technology originated during the height of the Cold War between the United States (US) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). There were strong concerns that a USSR nuclear attack would effectively obliterate the US; thus, there was a need to have a communications system that could withstand such strikes. During that time, computers were exclusively under the domain of military scientists and university academics. The first workable Internet prototype emerged in the late 1960s with the creation of the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (ARPANET), which was funded by the US Department of Defence. Its packet switching technology allowed multiple computers to communicate on a single network, enabling scientists and researchers to mutually share and exchange information. In 1974, a new method called transmission-control protocol/Internet protocol (TCP/IP) allowed different computer networks to "speak the same language" with one another, thus setting the foundation for a global inter-connected structure of networks, also known as the Internet.[1]

The technology continued developing at warp speed with the introduction of the World Wide Web by computer scientist Tim Berners-Lee in 1989 that facilitated the search for information on the Internet through websites and webpages. This empowered the general public to use digital technology independently to access the information superhighway. The era of Web 1.0 was characterised by simple static informational websites that had minimal interactivity. The evolution into Web 2.0 marked the emergence of Internet applications that allowed the public to

create, collaborate and share user-generated content, which led to the growth of social media. This form of digital communication permits Internet users to interact, creating social networks and online communities to share information, ideas, and messages. Six Degrees was the first social media site to be established in 1997 for users to upload a profile and connect with others, which was followed by Friendster in 2001 and MySpace in 2003. YouTube emerged in 2005, and by 2006, Facebook and Twitter started their domination of the social media scene. Today, niche social networking sites cater to the specific needs of online users such as Tumblr, Reddit, Pinterest and Tik-Tok.

Advantages of Social Media Use

One of the main benefits of social media is that it enables people to communicate and remain in contact with friends. These social networking sites assist people in reconnecting with long-lost friends and maintaining current relationships. Such digital platforms can widen a person's social circle because they allow people to network with others who have similar interests and views, which encourages the formation of new friendships and connections. This leads to the creation of online groups or communities that share common ground. Social media allows us to bring people together and connect strangers from all walks of life for a collective purpose. It facilitates greater discussion in society and expands the public sphere.

The ability to create online networks has led to activists using social media in their advocacy work by mobilising movements and people for their cause. One of the most notable examples of the use of social media for protests was the Arab Spring in 2010. Closer to home, Hong Kong students have also successfully used social media to share information, communicate and organise protests against the authorities that are seen to be clamping down on human rights and democracy. In Malaysia, the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (Bersih) has successfully used social

media to mobilise the public for street protests in an attempt to pressure the government to reform the electoral system in Malaysia. More recently, Thailand experienced a young, social media-driven demonstration against the government and demands for reform of the monarchy.

For businesses, social media enables advertising and marketing to large audiences at minimal cost. It is a platform for companies to communicate interactively with their customers, thus leading to better brand reputation and customer service. Through social media campaigns, businesses can increase their public visibility and profile. Job seekers and human resource personnel also benefit from professional networking sites such as LinkedIn that can open doors to various career opportunities.

There are also advantages in using social media for education. Students learn to connect with their peers and teachers by communicating through such platforms, making them active participants rather than passive content consumers. Working together on social media sites with their classmates promotes collaborative learning as they pool together and share information. Students who are naturally shy in person often do not speak up in class; however, as digital natives, they may be more comfortable to voice their opinions via social media. Geographical distance is also not an issue as students can network with anyone anywhere, broadening their scope of education and exposure to diverse cultures. During the COVID-19 pandemic, social media became an important tool in online teaching and learning.

Disadvantages of Social Media Use

Despite the many benefits of social media, it is a double-edged sword if improperly used. There are many negative issues that have cropped up due to the misuse of social networking sites, for example, cyberbullying and cyberstalking, as well as trolling and hate speech. The widespread

dissemination of fake news has led to confusion, sometimes even unrest and riots.

Cyberstalking and Cyberbullying

Cyberstalking involves the use of digital technology to harass and intimidate people such that they feel afraid or concerned about their personal safety. Victims experience persistent and unwanted contact from their cyberstalkers, who hide behind the anonymity afforded by the Internet and use its search engines, databases, social media, and other online resources to hunt for personal and private information about their victims to invade their privacy. Some examples of cyberstalking include tracking and monitoring their victims' location, online and offline activities through spyware or social media.[2] However, cyberstalking is more than just following someone on social media as the intention is to harass and terrorise the victims. For instance, cyberstalkers might publicly post the victim's personal information such as home address, phone number or identity card number to online bulletin boards and discussion groups with lewd or negative comments, causing the victim to receive numerous emails, calls or visits from strangers. They may even hack into their victims' online accounts to change their settings and passwords, impersonate the victims by creating false online accounts on social media sites, or contact the victims by employing a fake identity. Victims may receive hundreds of text messages or posts daily or find that their cyberstalkers appear uninvited in online groups and post comments about them constantly without their consent. Such behaviours may generate feelings of distress, anxiety, or fear among the victims.[3]

Cyberstalking is often linked with cyberbullying, which is bullying through the use of digital technology. It is repetitive behaviour aimed at attacking, terrorising, threatening, and shaming its victims. Examples of cyberbullying include sending, posting, or sharing false, negative, mean, or harmful content or information about the victim to cause embarrassment

or humiliation. Cyberbullies may create a website, blog, or poll to insult or ridicule, or circulate embarrassing photographs or videos about the victim to shame him or her.[4] The impact of cyberbullying is especially hard on victims who suffer mental health issues such as depression and can tragically trigger suicide. Japanese female professional wrestler Hana Kimura, who starred in a popular reality show, Terrace House, on Netflix, became a target of cyberbullying after the airing of an episode in which she lost her temper at a fellow co-star. She then experienced weeks of cyberbullying on her social media accounts, receiving up to 100 hateful posts daily that criticised her dark skin and lack of femininity, or called her "gorilla". She received tweets that told her to "never appear on TV again" or that "everybody will be happy if you are gone quickly". And on 23 May 2020, she took her own life.[5]

In 2019, South Korean celebrities Sulli and Goo Hara, who were also friends, killed themselves six weeks apart from each other, after suffering as targets of vicious online hate campaigns.[6] Sulli had received continuous online abuse and criticisms for supporting a feminist campaign that advocated women going braless. Meanwhile, Goo Hara's Instagram had comments from users about her appearance and plastic surgery; she also had to endure a scandal when her abusive ex-boyfriend blackmailed her by threatening to release sex tapes that could ruin her career. Since 2000, 40 South Korean celebrities have died by suicide, mainly due to cyberbullying.[7] In Malaysia, the number of cyberbullying cases has been on the rise. Statistics from the Ministry of Communications and Multimedia's national cybersecurity specialist agency, CyberSecurity Malaysia, show that the number of cyberharassment cases reported to its Cyber999 Help Centre rose from 260 in 2019 to 596 in 2020.[8] In a 2018 research on cyberbullying conducted by technology review website comparitech.com, Malaysia ranked second in Asia and sixth among 28 countries surveyed[9] In May 2020, Thivyaanayagi Rajendran, 20, a convenience store worker, committed suicide after a TikTok video of her and her Bangladeshi colleague was reposted on Facebook, with more than 300 criticisms and

ridicule of her "dating" a foreigner.[10] In her suicide note, she apologised for the video which had "shamed" her family. She wrote, "The reason I am taking this decision is because Joker Oruvan put my video on Facebook and spoiled my name and family name."

Cyberstalking and cyberbullying frequently occur because the perpetrators can become anonymous and hide behind fake accounts to avoid being identified or caught. Some think that their comments are just humorous and are unaware of the damage and consequences of their actions because they are unable to observe their victims' reactions behind the computer screen. Furthermore, there are social media users who believe that such behaviour is part of Internet sub-culture such as trolling, which is posting inflammatory and controversial messages online to get reactions from other users.

Trolling and Hate Speech

An Internet troll is someone who deliberately makes rude, inflammatory, or controversial remarks that are random and unsolicited on various online forums to evoke strong responses from people. Most trolls engage in this for their own amusement, but some do so to push an agenda or steer the conversation off-topic. Trolling is different from cyberstalking or cyberbullying because it is not targeted towards individuals. Instead, it is about provoking or instigating groups of people in an online community to argue and quarrel. Trolls exist in any online community on social media such as Twitter, Facebook, Reddit or comment sections in YouTube and news websites. Most trolls hide their real identities behind anonymous fake accounts so that it would be difficult to trace who they are; thus, they post provocative remarks without much worry about possible repercussions.

There are two main types of trolls, according to Mr Imran Ahmed, chief executive officer of the Centre for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH),

a non-governmental organisation.[11] The first type targets public figures who have large social media followings, hoping that they or their followers will respond. The other type consists of people who have "negative social potency", a psychological trait that enjoys causing harm to others. Mr Imran said, "These trolls get pleasure from upsetting those they target with abuse, so if their victim responds, it only encourages them to continue." Most people troll for revenge or to seek attention, said Dr Mark Griffiths, Professor of Behavioural Addiction at Nottingham Trent University.[12] Some also troll due to boredom or personal amusement. There are several characteristics of trolls, such as going completely off on an unrelated topic during a discussion, or making ridiculous and outrageous claims to trigger people's emotional response. They also refuse to accept and continue ignoring even when presented with hard, cold evidence. Their conversational tone is usually dismissive or condescending, and they seem to be oblivious to the fact that most people disagree with them. Trollers are not interested in proper conversations and prefer to be persistently provocative on purpose.

The best way to handle a troll is to ignore them. Trolls feed on attention and emotional responses, so by not reacting to their "baits", they will become bored and frustrated, and move away. As the saying goes, "Do not feed the trolls." One can also report the troll to the online platform's moderator or administrator for action to be taken for the inappropriate behaviour.

Meanwhile, hate speech is another form of negative online behaviour. The United Nations (UN) defines hate speech as "any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor."[13] The proliferation of hate speech threatens society's wellbeing because it generates intolerance, discrimination, and antagonism, usually

towards minority groups. If not addressed, hate speech can result in large-scale violence and conflict, and contributes to hate crime and possibly genocide. UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, said that "Hate speech has been a precursor to atrocity crimes, including genocide, from Rwanda to Bosnia to Cambodia."[14] This view is echoed by academic scholar Sheri P. Rosenberg, who said, "Genocide is a process, not an event. It did not start with the gas chambers, it started with hate speech."[15]

The Council on Foreign Relations noted that online hate speech has been linked to a global increase in violence towards minorities, including mass shootings, lynching, and ethnic cleansing.[16] Individuals who subscribe to ideologies such as racism, misogyny or homophobia have found echo chambers within social media niches that reinforce and strengthen their worldview. Social media enable hate groups to promote their beliefs, recruit new members and organise campaigns and events, on a scale far wider and broader than ever before. Governments are aware of the link between hate speech and violence, often using legislative means to prohibit speech that publicly incites violence against individuals or groups. Nevertheless, they need to balance the fight against hate speech while safeguarding free speech; any criminal sanctions should only be the last resort. Restrictions on hate speech should not be misused by governments to silence legitimate, robust criticism of its official policies by its opponents. A more effective approach would be for public and private institutions, media, and the Internet industry to self-regulate through adopting and enforcing codes of ethics, and sanctioning those who do not comply. Proper moderation of discourse on social media platforms can reduce the circulation and promotion of hate speech among its network of users. Education is also important in countering misconceptions and misinformation about others who are different, to reduce misunderstanding that results in hate speech. Society needs to learn to accept pluralism and be aware of respecting human rights and dignity.

Doxing and Cancel Culture

Doxing (sometimes spelt as doxxing) occurs when someone trawls the Internet to search, collect and sometimes hack to obtain people's private information and documents, such as home address, workplace, and financial matters.[17] The amassed data is subsequently disseminated and circulated to the public without the person's consent. The term doxing originated from the 1990s hacker culture where anonymity was sacrosanct. However, feuds and rivalries often cropped up among the hackers, and sometimes one would "drop docs" on another person by revealing their private data online in a publicly accessible file, thus destroying their anonymity and privacy. "Drop docs" eventually became the verb "dox". The aim of doxing is often to shame, embarrass or harass the person, as a form of revenge or online vigilantism. Doxers hope that their actions would cause the person to lose his or her job, or become shunned by family, friends, or colleagues as a form of punishment for a perceived transgression. In recent times, social justice warriors – over-enthusiastic Netizens who advocate issues of fairness and political correctness – have used this as a strategy in their cultural war by doxing those who hold opposing views.

One example of doxing was the "GamerGate" controversy in 2014 whereby male video game players publicly revealed private information such as home addresses and phone numbers of women in the gaming industry, who were outspokenly critical of the sexist stereotyping of females in video games. From the male gamers' perspective, these women – mainly games journalists and designers – were politicising gaming culture.[18] Another famous incident of doxing occurred in 2015 when US dentist and trophy hunter, Walter Palmer, killed Cecil, a 12-year-old male lion that was an icon in the protected Hwange National Park in Zimbabwe. Animal lovers, who were horrified and outraged by the incident, went online to "hunt down" Palmer by finding and publishing personal details about his home and workplace. He and his family were subject to harassment, both

online and offline.[19] This is not just a phenomenon overseas; Malaysians have also doxed those whom they perceive as transgressors. For example, in 2014, a woman was filmed abusing an elderly man during a road rage incident in Kuantan whereby she hit the man's car with a steering lock, hurled racist insults and demanded payment of MYR2,000 on the spot. Netizens spotted her car registration number from the video, traced her identity through social media accounts, obtained her personal information such as her mobile number and workplace information, and published these publicly online, thus exposing her to harassment and cyberbullying.[20]

The question, therefore, is whether doxing is ethical. For some, doxing allows them the opportunity to "correct" the perceived wrongdoing or injustice, and hold the wrongdoer to account through public shaming, especially when institutions or governments fail to act – a form of vigilante justice. However, doxing can also have serious consequences leading to loss of privacy and safety, public threats, vilification and harassment, loss of employment and reputation, or in the worst-case scenario – suicide. The jury is still out on whether doxing is ethical or not. For example, doxers who focus on White supremacists believe that they are sending a warning and protest that such ideology is not socially acceptable. In their belief, the ends justify the means. Philosophy scholars such as David Douglas argue that doxing may be justified in situations where it is necessary in the public interest to release relevant information that reveals wrongdoing and is analogous to whistleblowing. This is the threshold, and that the release of additional information which causes people to be abused, harassed, or intimidated is unjustifiable. In his view, doxing may be justified from a consequentialist perspective if the benefits to the public outweigh the harm to the person being doxed; furthermore, the person is perceived to have committed misdeeds.[21] However, other scholars such as David Brake believe that doxing is problematic because judgements based on social media may be premature due to lack of information or context. Furthermore, there are risks of error and misinformation, and that the consequences may be disproportionate and life-long. For doxing to be

ethical, it has to be executed with proper accountability, and not descend to the level of mob mentality.[22] However, this is easier said than done, and oftentimes, emotions cloud rationality.

Another form of public shaming is "cancel culture", which is the practice of withdrawing support, usually on social media, for public figures and companies once they commit actions that are deemed objectionable or offensive. This idea, which has links to Black culture (in the West), originated as a tool for marginalised groups to speak up against powerful authoritative public figures in society, with the aim of holding them accountable for their actions. Critics of cancel culture, however, claim that it is a form of harassment by online social justice warriors to silence opposing views, and goes against the tenets of free speech by creating an intolerant climate that weakens open debate and discussion. Consequences of cancel culture could include loss of reputation, income, and careers as a result of public boycotts.[23] One celebrity who experienced this was J.K. Rowling, author of the Harry Potter series, who faced retaliation for her views that advocating transgender rights might endanger women's rights.[24] Businesses also face reputational and financial consequences from cancel culture. Quaker Oats, which owned the pancake brand Aunt Jemima, decided to remove the image of the African-American woman from its logo and changed its name after being accused of perpetuating racial stereotypes.[25] Even six children's books by Dr Seuss were recalled and would no longer be printed due to perceived insensitive portrayals of Asian and Black characters.[26]

At the heart of cancel culture is the cultural and ideological war between liberals and conservatives in Western civilisation. Supporters of cancel culture tend to hold liberal, progressive views, believing that this avenue allows marginalised communities to speak out against behaviours that are deemed socially unacceptable or politically incorrect. Critics, however, tend to be conservatives and view cancel culture as a form of censorship.[27] This results in a "chilling effect" on freedom of speech and

expression and creates a toxic environment which encourages a mob mentality. The ethics of cancel culture is also problematic: One may view it as censorship that affronts free speech, while another may see it as being accountable for inappropriate opinions. For example, the #MeToo movement, which called out powerful individuals for sexual harassment, led to changes in cultural attitudes towards women. Celebrities such as Harvey Weinstein, Bill Cosby, R. Kelly, and Kevin Spacey, were effectively cancelled due to their sexual transgressions.[28] Weinstein, Cosby, and R. Kelly have been convicted. Although charges against Spacey were dropped, he has been unable to revive his acting career since then.

These are a few cases in which cancel culture was proven effective mainly because the acts by the perpetrators were undoubtedly reprehensible, and that the evidence against them was overwhelming. But in reality, effectively cancelling a public figure is easier said than done. The celebrity may face intense public backlash for a short while but is unlikely to suffer long-term consequences. For example, the sale of J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter books increased in Great Britain despite outrage about her perceived transphobic statements. Her latest children's book, *The Ickabog*, was an instant bestseller with good reviews from critics.[29] In some situations, the threat of being cancelled may boost sympathy and support from the celebrity's supporters. For example, the decision by Dr Seuss' publisher to stop printing a few "problematic" books led to renewed interest and sales in his books, which made it to the bestseller lists.[30]

The real impact of cancel culture is that it deepens the cultural and ideological divide, causing more polemic and polarisation, instead of more dialogue and understanding. The instantaneous feature of social media means that complicated social issues are often compressed into soundbites, TikTok videos or Instagram photos, discouraging nuanced discussions. Public discourse becomes binary, reduced to black and white without appreciating the different shades of greys in-between, and may affect people's ability to relate to another another. Instead of cancel culture,

perhaps the more effective strategy should be to talk and listen, in an effort to understand one another. As the axiom goes, seek first to understand in order to be understood.

Fake News, Misinformation and Disinformation

Fake news has long existed in human history. In fact, Pope Francis, in a papal message marking World Communications Day in 2018, said that the earliest incidence of fake news probably occurred when the "crafty serpent" tricked Adam and Eve into eating the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden.[31] According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), "news" is "verifiable information in the public interest", and information that fail these standards should not be labelled as news. In its Handbook for Journalism Education and Training, entitled Journalism, 'Fake News' and Disinformation, it states that 'fake news' is an oxymoron which undermines the credibility of 'real news', which is information that meets the requirement of verifiability and public interest.[32] The Collins English Dictionary defines fake news as "false, often sensational, information disseminated under the guise of news reporting" and named it "Word of the Year" when use of the term rose 365% in 2017.[33]

Today, fraudulent, phony information are increasingly circulated via social media. UNESCO identifies two types of fake news: Misinformation and Disinformation. Misinformation refers to a situation where "misleading information" is "created or disseminated without manipulative or malicious intent"; in other words, the person believes the information to be truthful, and is unaware of its falsity. In contrast, disinformation occurs when a person knows that the information is false but deliberately disseminates it anyway in an attempt to "confuse or manipulate people". UNESCO warns that both phenomena are problematic, but disinformation is "particularly dangerous because it is frequently organised, well resourced, and reinforced by automated

technology"; it is also a "deliberate, intentional lie" which results in "people being actively disinformed by malicious actors". Disinformation is an old story that is fuelled by new technology, according to UNESCO, and those who disseminate disinformation exploit the susceptibility and predisposition of its receivers to share information through social media, by turning them into "amplifiers and multipliers".[34]

In his papal message, Pope Francis noted that "spreading fake news can serve to advance specific goals, influence political decisions, and serve economic interests".[35] Media scholars have discovered producers of fake news are mainly motivated by financial or political gain. Fake news for profit is analogous to yellow journalism, where news is sensationalised to increase circulation and profits. This is often associated with the 2016 US presidential elections whereby Macedonian teenagers discovered that they could profit from social media advertising by producing and circulating sensational and fabricated political news stories. This was because supporters of then presidential candidate Donald Trump were more susceptible to liking, sharing and/or commenting on fake news that fitted their paradigm, with social media algorithms enabling unverified news to become viral.[36]

Propaganda can also disguise itself as fake news as part of its strategy to manipulate and influence public opinion; it is inherently biased towards the message creator, whereas real news objectively informs without persuasive intention. The problem with fake news is that if one repeats a lie often enough, people will eventually end up believing it. The idea of the "big" lie is often associated with Adolf Hitler and his chief propagandist, Joseph Goebbels. UNESCO notes that fake news today is more than just false and misleading information which is camouflaged and circulated as news; it has become "an emotional, weaponised term used to undermine and discredit journalism". Society today is experiencing a "disinformation war" that targets journalists and the journalism profession.[37]

The proliferation of fake news results in confusion as people struggle to discern truth from falsehoods, wheat from chaff. In the wild, wild west of the Internet, anyone and everyone can be a publisher. Extremist views and conspiracy theories flourish in abundance, as cynicism and distrust threaten the existence of once-accepted objective truths and institutions. One recent phenomenon is the emergence of QAnon, an extreme right-wing community network who believes the conspiracy theory that former US president Donald Trump is battling a secret war against Satan-worshipping paedophiles that exist in and control large institutions such as government, business, and media. This belief started in October 2017 when someone posted a series of messages on 4chan, a wholly anonymous, anything-goes online bulletin board, and signed off as "Q" because he or she allegedly had "Q clearance", which is the US government's highest level of security clearance for nuclear weapons. Q remains anonymous, hence the nomenclature QAnon; while the cryptic messages became known as "Q drops" or "breadcrumbs" with followers eagerly trying to decipher them.[38]

According to QAnon, the world is being controlled by a "deep state", and that the military recruited Donald Trump to run for president to overthrow it. The "deep state", which controls the media, tries to discredit Trump by using "fake news" such as alleging that he had conspired with Russia. QAnon followers believe in "the storm", which is judgement day when "deep state" leaders are caught and send to Guantanamo Bay to pay for their crimes. These fringe ideas evolved and started gaining traction in mainstream social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Reddit.[39] New conspiracy theories developed and attracted more followers. For example, all previous presidents were "deep state" agents except for Trump, and that members of the Democratic Party are part of a child sex trafficking ring. QAnon followers organised a "Save Our Children" campaign to drum up support, and the #SaveTheChildren hashtag was mentioned more than 800,000 times on Twitter in August 2020, according to the Associated Press.[40] Current US President Joe Biden

also faced unfounded QAnon allegations during his campaign trail in 2020 that he was a paedophile. [41]

QAnon ideology has permeated mainstream consciousness with celebrities such as actors Roseanne Bar and James Woods, as well as Curt Schilling, a former Red Sox pitcher and currently a right-wing radio host, endorsing its beliefs.[42] Two QAnon supporters, Marjorie Taylor Greene and Lauren Boebert, were elected to the US House of Representatives.[43] Although social media giants such as Facebook and Twitter have removed or banned tens of thousands of QAnon groups, pages and accounts, this action is too little, too late as Pandora's box has opened and taken root. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has warned that fringe conspiracy theories like QAnon pose a growing domestic terrorism threat. Its predictions came true with the insurrection of the US Capitol Building in January 2021 to disrupt a ceremonial event to affirm President-elect Joe Biden's win in the November 2020 election.[44] Hundreds of pro-Trump QAnon supporters, who were mostly armed, burst through a security barrier and stormed into the building, forcing the Senate to evacuate and then Vice-President Mike Pence to be whisked off to safety.[45] Five people died as a result of the mob attack and this incident exposed QAnon's violent tendencies.[46] Prior to this riot, some QAnon supporters have been agitating for a military takeover of the US government. In early 2020, a QAnon believer, armed with more than a dozen knives, drove to New York to "take out" Joe Biden and Hillary Clinton.[47] Journalists covering the QAnon movement have been threatened with doxing, harm, and even death. Belief in QAnon has also resulted in families and friends being torn apart – siblings, parents, grandparents, couples, and close friends refusing to communicate with each other.

The Importance of Media Literacy

The abovementioned social media issues are multifaceted and require a multitude of approaches at different levels. Nevertheless, media and information literacy are essential parts of the solution to the myriad problems. The Center for Media Literacy (CML) defines media literacy as the ability to "access, analyse, evaluate and create messages in a variety of forms – from print to video to the Internet".[48] It helps users to navigate the treacherous waters of cyberspace so that they do not drown in the cesspool of fake news and disinformation, thus reducing the risk of being manipulated by propaganda. They also learn to critically analyse and evaluate different aspects of media and their contents, and to understand the impact of their participation as netizens. CML believes that media literacy "builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of a democracy."[49] A society that is media literate will be able to make objective, informed decisions based on truthful facts rather than lies and propaganda. People will also be able to communicate effectively and respectfully on social media, thus reducing negative impact and consequences. UNESCO believes that media and information literacy will empower people to use the Internet responsibly as it "empowers citizens to understand the functions of media and other information providers, to critically evaluate their content, and to make informed decisions as users and producers of information and media content."[50]

Communicating Responsibly on Social Media

In order to learn how to communicate responsibly on social media, perhaps we can draw inspiration from Pope Francis' adaptation of a Franciscan prayer in his 2018 papal message on World Communications Day:[51]

Lord, make us instruments of your peace.
Help us to recognise the evil latent in a communication
that does not build communion.
Help us to remove the venom from our judgements.
Help us to speak about others as our brothers and sisters.
You are faithful and trustworthy;
may our words be seeds of goodness for the world:
where there is shouting, let us practise listening;
where there is confusion, let us inspire harmony;
where there is ambiguity, let us bring clarity;
where there is exclusion, let us offer solidarity;
where there is sensationalism, let us use sobriety;
where there is superficiality, let us raise real questions;
where there is prejudice, let us awaken trust;
where there is hostility, let us bring respect;
where there is falsehood, let us bring truth.
Amen.

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