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Paola Pascual-Ferra

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# A Medium for Social Health

By Paola Pascual-Ferra

**I still remember** driving back from Miami on September 11, 2001, when I tuned into the radio and I heard that the Twin Towers in Manhattan had collapsed. Without a visual reference, I could not fathom the scale of the disaster. But later I remained paralyzed in front of the TV screen as the media replayed the images of the towers collapsing and people jumping from the top floors. Back before Facebook and Twitter, all these emotions were pent up inside of me, but I had no place to release them. I stayed up several nights, staring at the night sky, and for several days walked around in a constant state of anxiety and fear. I – we – needed some form of communal catharsis.

In my scholarship, I have studied the dark side of texting and other communication technologies and their impact on health. Indeed, the literature is extensive and shows evidence that excessive social media use can lead to negative health consequences. Communication scholars usually refer to these negative effects as the “dark side” of communication.

At the same time, many studies have focused on the health *benefits* that the Internet and social media can bring to individuals,

such as online support groups and mobile apps to change behavior for positive health outcomes. For example, the use of online support groups for quitting smoking and other forms of addiction, mobile apps for weight loss and medication treatment management, and even the use of online video conferencing in the patient-provider context are some examples of positive applications of the Internet and social media.

But there is a particular use of the Internet and social media that should matter to those of us working in Jesuit institutions. Pope Francis calls us to a culture of encounter and accompaniment, to reach out and walk with others in their pain and suffering. For him, the Internet has become an integral part of his ministry, as is clear in his different social media feeds. According to Pope Francis, we should not shy away from these new and emerging media platforms; on the contrary, we should embrace all the opportunities that they offer to connect and engage with “the other.”

Just consider how many people used the Internet and social media in connection with the Parkland, Fla., school shooting on February 14. The Internet,

through different news sources and social media, was used to notify others of what occurred. Updates, pictures, and videos alerted others close to the school to avoid the area and informed people not at the scene of what was going on.

Social media was used both by those who suffered directly from the tragedy to express their emotions as a form of catharsis as well as by those not connected to the event to show their solidarity with people suffering. In the specific case of Parkland, social media was also used to organize and mobilize communities across the United States around the issue of gun control.

The ability to feel that one can do something in the face of tragedy, that there are positive and constructive ways in which one can get involved – what scholars in psychology and communication may call self-efficacy and response efficacy – serves to keep hope alive in the midst of so much senselessness. For the alternative, “hopelessness,” as Bryan Stevenson, author of *Just Mercy*, recently reminded us in his keynote during Mission Week at Loyola University Maryland, “is the enemy of justice.”

Similarly, last September, my

native home of Puerto Rico was beaten by one of the most devastating hurricanes in recent history. In its immediate aftermath, Puerto Ricans living outside the island took to the Internet to vent their distress and find out what they could about family members and loved ones after losing almost all phone communication.

At Loyola, we reached out to our Puerto Rican students and invited them to come together and share their feelings over a meal. Many of them expressed feeling anxious and helpless being so far away from their families. They wanted to do something. They

took to social media to organize a drive for supplies to send to the island, joining other communities of Puerto Ricans across the United States. One of the students had the initiative of organizing a Facebook group to offer emotional support to those affected by the hurricane. The fact that these initiatives came from the students and that their first instinct was to use social media as a tool for good, to show solidarity and to be of service to others gives me great hope for this generation.

In the end, while social media and Internet use may pose some negative and unintended effects

to health, they also offer ample opportunities for communities to take care of each other and to support one another. One of the core values of our Jesuit institutions is the care of the whole person; in our work we are encouraged to “meet others where they are at.” If we are to honor these guiding principles, we must consider individuals’ offline *and online* selves, go to them and walk with them in those spaces as well.

*Paola Pascual-Ferra is an assistant professor of communication at Loyola University Maryland.*

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