



## More than a media system failure? Reason, faith and mercy as comprehensive paradigms for communication

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## More than a media system failure? Reason, faith and mercy as comprehensive paradigms for communication

The issues that this new installment of *Church Communication and Culture* deals with were mostly scheduled quite before the some significant and surprising events in Western countries. I am referring to the Brexit vote in Great Britain (June 23), the Colombia's referendum on the peace process (October 2) and Trump's election for president of the United States (November 8). These three important events, which have shaken both published and public opinion, are having immediate effects that will continue for a long time.

It is yet too soon to guess a direction that the course of events will take or to draw conclusions about their meaning from the point of view of communication – although much ink has been already poured forth – or even to foresee their impact in the communication media system. One thing is clear, in my view, that all three events have conveyed – or increased whenever it was already present – the latent awareness of a media system failure. It is not just a unanimous error of polls previsions, error that cannot be explained only in terms of statistics, but a widespread induced sense that the mainstream media is missing its monitoring function of society.

As a journal that intends, among its goals, 'to enhance the analysis of current communication trends', we should not neglect a thought, although provisional, about the underlying meaning of these events. A brief summary of the events follows, and a little more on Brexit and Trump's election can be found in February's paper, *Church Communication Highlights 2016*.

The referendum for the departure of the United Kingdom from the European Union promoted by the *then* Prime Minister, David Cameron, produced the contrary effect expected by his promoter, with immediate consequences including the resignation of several political leaders (Cameron himself, Boris Johnson, the leader of the UK Independent Party – UKIP, Nigel Farage...). The political and social effects are still to be seen, but uncertainty and untrustworthiness have certainly spread in Europe and abroad.

The peace agreement reached between the Colombian government and the FARC group<sup>1</sup> was presented by international media as the final and successful fruit of a long negotiation process. The rejection of the deal by the population in a national referendum of ratification, although by a low different percentage, was a cool shower for the government, for the FARC leaders, for the international observers and, not least, for the Norwegian Committee who had awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for 2016 to Colombia's president Juan Manuel Santos, for his 'resolute efforts to bring the country's more than 50-year-long civil war to an end, a war that has cost the lives of at least 220,000 Colombians and displaced close to six million people'.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, and most significantly, the triumph of Donald Trump in the 58th elections for the presidency of the United States of America was the last alarm bell to a media system in a deep crisis of credibility. If the media has, among other tasks, the obligation of monitoring and interpreting the social reality, it must first get to know that reality and mirror it as much as possible. When, borrowing the famous Lippmann's metaphor, 'the world outside and the pictures in our heads' (Lippmann, [1992] 1998, 3) do not fit or, worst, are

bluntly distorted, it implies that the lens or the mirror is no longer useful and may be discarded.

For sure, the well-tested theory of the spiral of silence, formulated by Noelle-Neumann (1993), may help explain all three unexpected results – Brexit, the Colombia referendum and Trump's election – as some analysts anticipated in the case of the US President Election<sup>3</sup>. Certainly, a 'looking-glass perception' (Noelle-Neumann, 216–217) diagnosis can be applied to all three events, in as much as public opinion was so half-divided that the two camp sites were no longer able to see each other. The refraction of the mirror prevented every side from watching the other. Nevertheless, a deeper reflection may be required, a reflection that links with the *raison d'être* of the *Church, Communication and Culture* journal.

The alarm signals of a malady in the whole media system are not new and cannot be reduced to the technological tectonic shift that the digital brings in the production, creation and dissemination of news or other media contents. Just to mention one of the symptoms, freedom of speech, a pillar of Western civilization, is no longer taken for granted (*Free speech under attack*, 'The Economist', 2016, June 4–10) nor even understood by the new generations (Pujol 2016, 1–15). And, for sure, it is not only the media system to be blamed for this, nor does it have the privilege of being the exclusive source of the illness.

The symptoms of the crisis reach crucial social knots; first of all, in education. As Martha C. Nussbaum, puts it: 'Today we are witnessing a creeping crisis of enormous proportions and global reach – the less it is noticed, the more dangerous it is for the future of democracy: the crisis of education (...) Hence, while the world becomes larger and more complex, the tools to understand it are becoming poorer and more rudimentary' (Nussbaum 2016, 1–10). She rightly argues that education for profit has displaced education for citizenship, and with the sidelining of the Humanities, critical thinking, empathy, and the understanding of injustice are neglected.

A prominent theologian, who then became Pope Benedict XVI, also pulled the alarm on the educational emergency in his *Letter to the Faithful of the Diocese and City of Rome on the Urgent Task of Educating Young People* (21 January 2008).

These and other diagnoses, and the opinion shared by many, are witness to a failure that is not only scholarly, but precisely *educational*. It is not my purpose to enlarge the discourse, nor my duty to delve deeper into this question that is multifaceted and has been denounced by many relevant thinkers from different backgrounds. It is otherwise manifest in different fields, even in such a humanistic one as the study of Literature<sup>4</sup>.

Specifically, this diagnosis can be applied to the practices of scholarly learning and teaching communication in Western countries. I agree with Cantoni et al. (2008) when they remind us that in an ever more complex world, with an educational system so increasingly jagged that it does not (cannot, in fact) keep pace with the proliferation of specialized knowledge, we must return to the hinges of education: the ability to reason methodically and with order (Logic), to master the language (Grammar) and to speak well in order to effectively communicate a thought (Rhetoric). In short, a return to the old *Trivium*, in new garments, is most needed. Unfortunately it is not the way most of the Schools of Communication are following, as Rafal Lesnizack (2010) has proven in his detailed exam of a representative sample of European Schools of Communication curricula<sup>5</sup>.

Instead of this kind of diagnosis and healing, we have read about many shortcuts – and shortcomings – in numerous accounts concerning the abovementioned events, and we need to draw lessons from them. For example, although blaming technology is easy, one such shortcut has been the supposedly 'wise' introduction of methods of selecting

relevant news through mere algorithms; well-intentioned on the part of those who acclaim the Internet as neutral, but with a rather ‘Orwellian’ flavor.

Blaming technology has always been an easy scapegoat. The studies and books that condemn the effect of a cultural impoverishment resulting from new technologies are many, for example Nicholas Carr’s *The Shallows. What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (Carr 2010).

Nevertheless, we have to be reminded that every new medium of communication introduces a cultural gain and, at the same time, a loss, as McLuhan (1964) showed. Therefore, for example, the printing press extended reading to all social strata and allowed for mandatory universal education. However, as a result, almost the entire oral culture in all of its richness faded out (Ong 1982). It seems almost intuitive that the printing press promotes a linear, sequential, and more logical thought-process, whereas an associative thought-process is favored by links. Each technical transformation forms part of human development, and it takes generations to get used to it, to assimilate and dominate it. In this process of assimilation, that is at the same time social and personal, dysfunctions occur and are often paid for at a high price.

Now, blaming technology or holding mainly social networks to account for misinformation is just missing the target. On the other hand, what of the fact that the picture of the world in the American election and in the two referenda was more accurate in social networks than in the media mainstream? The following cartoon, which has become very popular in some quarters, shows how self-indulgently the old mainstream media system looks at itself (<http://www.universaluclick.com/editorial/mattwuerker>).

There are no shortcuts to bypass the fatigue of interpreting the world, whether social or personal. As Ratzinger put it in the aforementioned letter, with beautiful lyrics to a melody of thinking that he has repeated many times: ‘unlike the economic or scientific progress, the greatest values of the past cannot be simply inherited; they must be made ours and renewed through an often anguishing personal choice’.

As a new Journal in the field of communication, our approach to reading and relaying events lays its foundation in ‘the complementarity of faith and reason, truth and communication: in as much as faith enhances reason and reason protects faith from corruption (political abuse, economic gain, and other negative influences), truth prevents communication from being reduced to mere techniques for persuasion or even manipulation’.<sup>6</sup>

With this general outline in mind, here follow briefly some of the subjects covered in this upcoming volume of *Church, Communication and Culture*; subjects key to understanding the selection of papers for 2017.

## Faith, Reason, Mercy ... and Communication

Human culture implies a spiritual dimension. In the words of John Paul II, faith that does not become culture is not a lived faith. Faith, nevertheless, goes further than religion; faith embeds itself in culture, creates culture – not only religious culture – and does not reduce nor dissolve into culture. It overcomes religion. That is, while taking flesh in culture and so becoming also a religion, faith cannot and should not be reduced to mere religion. This relationship and the mutual benefits and risks are examined in the analysis that theologian O’Callaghan faces in his article on ‘Cultural Challenges to Faith’.

A reasoned criticism of the media system is presented in the colloquy with senior Italian semiotic Gianfranco Bettetini (1933–2017)<sup>7</sup>. The authors of the long interview, professors Armando Fumagalli and Paolo Braga, intellectual disciples of Bettetini, succeed in presenting the main points of the extended academic career of the interviewee as well

as his critical view on the current audiovisual media system. For Bettetini, the pervasion of the social media, the information overload and the banalization of the spectacular are ‘anesthetizing’ the audience. Therefore, he proposes to recover the ‘pedagogical’ role of the media and put the ‘question of values at the center of the discussion on culture’.

The impact of the TV culture in shaping life styles is also evident in the article by Juan José García-Noblejas, in which the ethical and anthropological dimensions of some European TV series are presented. His analysis of some TV series resorts to an original method, one that calls for distinguishing between an anthropological reason applicable to people in the real world and the *dramatis personae*. As he puts it: ‘There are two coherent anthropological behaviors that may contribute to a viewers’ active position. The first one is to consider that Aristotle’s *Poetics* and the contemporary extension of his content can rationally account for those stories and dramas, today precisely qualified as ‘tragic’. The second one is to understand the real world and its dramatic representations, in accordance with Leonardo Polo’s transcendental anthropology, the vision which Jürgen Habermas finds in religions, and Joseph Ratzinger – articulating reason and faith – has summed up as living ‘*veluti si Deus daretur*’.

Of course, religious communities, and in a particular way the Catholic Church, engage with society and promote dialogue with different cultures. This dialogical engagement has important communication dimensions. One attractive example has been given by Pope Francis and his proclamation of a Jubilee of Mercy in the Catholic Church, from December 2015 till November 2016. Mercy has become a powerful interpretative key for the current historical moment and this is what Austen Ivereigh will show in his case study on the Year of Mercy.<sup>8</sup> John Allen Jr and Inés San Martín in *Church Communication Highlights 2016* have also pointed to Mercy as the link of all Pope Francis’ actions: ‘the Rosetta stone that unlocks every other element of his outlook and agenda’. They believe that Francis will probably think of the 2017 Year of Mercy as his papacy’s most important moment, where the Church was able to offer humanity ‘The Gospel of God’s endless mercy’.

At first sight, the ‘mercy paradigm’ that Pope Francis is introducing in the worldwide public debate – mainly with gestures and actions more than words – is resonating with both popular consensus, on the one hand, and intellectual polemics, on the other hand. The latter, the contestation, is probably noisier in his own camp, the Catholic community, unlike the precedent pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI. A paradoxical situation is at work here. I advance my personal interpretation that accounts for the decision to include Ivereigh’s case study and also the reviews of two very recent books in the Book review section (Benedict XVI, and Peter Seewald. 2016. *Last Testament: In His Own Words*. Translated by Jacob Phillips. New York: Bloomsbury. And Juan Vicente Boo. 2016. *El Papa de la alegría*, Madrid: Espasa).

The ‘mercy paradigm’ may change the battlefield where faith, the Catholic Church in particular, and the Enlightenment have culturally fought, so to say.

Oversimplifying, I would say that we are still living in the epilogue of that epochal cultural and religious clash between reason and faith and vice versa. The theological and philosophical confrontation that has been held for centuries in the Western world has permeated the minds in a more lasting way than we are used to thinking. As we know, the political expedient to solve the problem of peaceful living after the bloody ‘religion wars’ of the seventeenth century was adopting the *cuius regio, eius religio* criteria for political entities of the time (kingdoms or states). On a broader frame, with more universal pretenses, the hope of bringing a new social order on the basis of reason and its ability to lay common ground was spread, inasmuch as faith was no longer able to do so. The

Enlightenment gave theoretical form to that principle claiming tolerance as a rule for peacefully living together and reason as an alternative to faith for building it. All the way along, the conflict has been a conflict in many disguises between reason and faith: faith and science, faith and morals, religion and politics, etc. And that conflict has been held in the name of and within the truth-error paradigm.

On its part, faith, at least in the case of the Catholic Church's teachings, has squared up the accounts with reason, both theoretical and practical reason, mainly in Vatican Council II (1965) and later on with three epochal documents: The *Dignitatis Humanae* Declaration of Religious Freedom of the Vatican II, which recognizes the universal freedom of liberty of the conscience and disenfranchises the Catholic Church from any religious order established by secular power, and the encyclicals *Fides et Ratio* (John Paul II 1998), which settles the relationship between theoretical reason and faith, and *Veritatis Splendor* (John Paul II 1993), which finds the inner harmony between faith and practical reason, bringing together the universality of natural law and the unique role of conscience. These two later fruits of Vatican II are the work of John Paull II with the help of Ratzinger, two direct witnesses and participants in the most important assembly of the whole Catholic Church in the last five centuries.

Meanwhile, the Enlightenment's aims instead seem to be exhausted and disenchanted: the ideals of Reason as the light of full comprehension and, therefore, social stability, have been proved an illusion. The spread of mistrust in reason, with the explosion of relativism, and the fallibility of tolerance, with the re-proposal of strong political populisms, invite humankind to rethink the fundamental principles, in order to make sense of things.

Now, in my opinion, mercy holds together the practical reason and the theoretical reason without cancelling or diminishing either. The original discourse of tolerance (Ocariz Braña 1979) at the beginning of modern times implied that, regardless of the truth or error of any moral proposition, you have to respect the individual freedom for searching for truth, particularly in terms of religion. But the idea of tolerance has conveyed likewise the tenets, as a kind of subtext, that there are unbearable doings, actions which cannot be tolerated notwithstanding freedom, and that there is a minimum common denominator that defines the code penal law of any society. In fact, religious or moral coercion is one of these intolerable doings; intolerable, for it is based in a theoretical and practical truth: the dignity of conscience. When tolerance ends up being the *ultima ratio*, the only and definitive word as a theoretical basis to solve practical conflicts, we gain relativism as a result. And relativism, while asserting the impossibility of defining any moral truth, leaves us without a guide to find any common ground apart from in the power of the majority.

Many Catholics, and their non-Catholic contemporaries as well, still inhabit intellectually one of the two mindsets that the Enlightenment has brought forward culturally: Modernity as decadence (cultural relativism in its many shapes) or Modernity as resistance (traditionalism or even fundamentalism in orthodoxy disguise).

Mercy, according to Christian faith, implies accepting misery as part of reality. That misery, either material or moral, expects to be solved. Mercy is thus solidarity in action and, at the same time, judgment is in action, from the moment that misery is seen as a lack, a defect or a sin with respect to a good that is not possessed. And it is this judgment, based in the acceptance of truth which collides with a relativistic view.

In his article on Caravaggio's "Seven Works of Mercy" (Naples), Ralf van Bühren gives new insights into the relevance of art history to cultural journalism, which may help news religious correspondents, and PR practitioners of the Church.

Although the artistic heritage of the Catholic Church still attracts attention all over the world, the cultural journalism is disappearing from traditional media. For this reason art



historians and journalists should raise up issues to uplift audiences. The article on Caravaggio explains how the reference of a famous painting to human life can help the audience to explore mercy in their own lives. This idea “can build a cultural awareness, that works of art in Christianized societies offer a wide range of semantic meaning, and sometimes in a very personal way” (van Bühren).

The paradigm of mercy is not just a spiritual whim, out of the realm of public human affairs. It has political meaning, in the deepest sense of political (*polis*). As Hannah Arendt put it in her groundbreaking work *The Human Condition*, where she established the crucial, and yet forgotten, difference among *labor, work and action*: ‘the remedy against the irreversibility and unpredictability of the process started by acting does not arise out of another and possibly higher faculty, but it is one of the potentialities of action itself. The possible redemption from the predicament of irreversibility – of being unable to undo what one has done though one did not, and could not, have known what he was doing – is the faculty of forgiving. The remedy for unpredictability, for the chaotic uncertainty of the future, is contained in the faculty to make and keep promises’ (Arendt 1958, 236-237).

Faith does not offer shortcuts nor save the work and struggle of reasoning. Both faith and reason, working together, empower man: reason gives him a responsible critical view, and makes him also capable of self-criticism, while faith offers and gives hope to overcome the shortcomings and failures of his endeavors, apart from introducing him in a new supernatural order with the corresponding ability to ‘navigate’ through. The world, also the social human world has a sense, a meaning that waits to be discovered. It also applies to field of communication.

Those are the premises that inspire our commitment as a journal, and I hope any reader may find traces of them in this new issue, as well as challenging motivations to his personal views that we will be glad to receive as fruitful feedback.

## Notes

1. The FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) is a guerrilla armed movement of Marxist inspiration that has conducted a conflict with the different Colombian governments since its creation in 1964.
2. [https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/](https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/)
3. Durand, C. 2016. USA2016: What’s happening? What about the “undecided”?, in her blog “Ah, les sondages”. Accessed 22 December 2016 <http://ahlessondages.blogspot.it/2016/11/usa2016-whats-happening-what-about.html>
4. Tzvetan Todorov, one of the fathers of the Poetics of the literary discourse, in a brief yet fascinating essay, denounces how deconstructionism, nihilism, and solipsism - which currently dominate scholastic teaching, literary critique, and writing - are ruining the students’ interest toward literature. In France, for example, it has been calculated that over a few decades enrolling in literary studies at university has dropped from 33 to 10 percent: “Without any stupor, those who graduate learn dogma that excludes literature from having any relationship with the rest of the world. They only study the relationships among the elements of the work itself.” (Todorov 2011, p. 30). These tendencies, interdependent on each other, are based on the idea that “a radical rupture separates the self from the world” and therefore a common world does not exist.
5. The Schools under analysis belong to these countries: Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Poland and Spain.
6. Read the full explanation of the goals, pillars and cornerstones of our journal at <http://explore.tandfonline.com/content/ah/chuch-communication-culture-aims>.
7. While this issue of the Journal was being edited, Prof. Bettetini passed away in Milan on January 12, 2017. We are glad to pay homage to him by publishing his last interview,

which we hope will be a faithful acknowledgment to Bettetini's work and to academics devoted to Semiotics.

8. Ivereigh's case study will be published in coming issues of this year volume.

## Disclosure statement

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