

THE USE OF INTERNET AND ITS CHALLENGE FOR OUR CURRENT SOCIAL ENVIROMENT

A Critical Reflection on the Perspective of the Communication Theology

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ABSTRAK

Dewasa ini internet telah menjadi sebuah budaya baru dalam hidup manusia modern. Internet menguasai kehidupan manusia modern sehingga dapat dikatakan bahwa manusia modern yang hidup tanpa internet bagaikan “sayur tanpa garam”. Karena itu internet dapat dipandang sebagai sebuah kekuatan signifikan dalam budaya modern. Tulisan ini membahas karakteristik internet sebagai media perantara dalam budaya modern. Gagasan sentral tulisan ini ialah internet menjadi “budaya perantara” yang merefleksikan dan menghasilkan budaya baru dalam hidup manusia. Dalam konteks komunikasi pastoral, budaya internet menjadi sebuah kesempatan untukewartakan Injil, sebagai media untuk mendidik, menginformasikan, mencerahkan dan mempertemukan manusia sekaligus berfungsi sebagai media untuk melayani kebutuhan dan kehidupan seluruh umat manusia.

KEYWORDS :

Internet, Social Enviroment, Communication Theology

1. Introduction

The presence of mass media in the society is an inseparable and integral part of human life. One of the forms of mass media which is well known is internet or virtual communication. The Internet is not only used to inform, to entertain, and to educate but it can also help human beings to

communicate themselves to each other around the world. I personally feel that to live without using the internet is like “a till without leaves”, “men without breath”, “and vegetables without salt”. We truly realize that communities and individuals are surrounded constantly with lots of messages or information from the *internet* and other forms of mass media. Therefore the internet culture is seen as a significant force in modern culture which is referred to as **mediated culture** where it reflects and creates the culture.

This writing is focused on expounding and analysing *the Internet or Virtual community* which presents the characteristics of the mediated culture in our current social environment. And after expounding and analyzing it, I will identify some challenges and consequences in communicating the faith.

2. The Birth of a New Culture

The remarkable development of modern communication technology such as electronic media has big influence on human life. We are living now in “the global village” where plenty of information can be accessed easily any time and anywhere. We can know everything that happens around us just in a few minutes because of media like TV, Radio, Newspaper and internet. We can meet, talk, and share with each other without meeting in a particular place. We can do this by simply using *Video call, Skype, Yahoo messenger, Viber, Wechat, BBChat*, etc. we can reach out to anybody around the world. Another thing, we live in the global information and entertainment where anything can be mediated by media.

In the awareness of these modern communication we realize that we actually live in a *communication culture* which is created by media and new communication technology.¹ This was stressed clearly by St. John Paul II in his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, “*new culture is created by modern communication which refers to the way of communication with new languages, new techniques and new psychology.*”²

This birth of a new culture and its changes has created a civilization shift of behavior, style of life, way of life, way of thinking, custom, arts, knowledge and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. In fact, this communication culture has created and mediated lots of possibilities for people to communicate and to express him/herself perfectly to each other, but, on the contrary, sometimes it is over used and abused which contradicts with ethic values, moral values and virtue values. Facing these realities we are reminded that, whilst welcoming them with great joy and adjusting ourselves with them as well, we also have to be aware and critical in using them in order to protect ourselves from its negative influences.

3. The Internet as a New Culture

The most important characteristic of mediated culture can be found in the *internet culture or virtual communication*. The internet is certainly a very powerful and seductive tool. All people of all levels can not separate themselves from the internet. Especially for the young generation, the internet is like a part of their breath and soul. Through the internet they

¹Cf. Franz Josef-Eilers, *Communicating Church, Social Documents: An Introduction*, second Edition (Manila: Logos Publication, Inc., 2014), 199.

²John Paul II, *The encyclical Letter, Redemptoris Missio*, No. 37c.

can share their interest, information, opinion, hobbies and so on. According to Jen-Nicolas, there are several characteristics that make the internet an important phenomenon and these are the following: *its power*, *its universality* and *its interactivity*.³ What Jen- Nicolas mentions is true. Internet is more powerful and universal than any other inventions. It makes possible to be in virtual contact with any person or any reality irrespective of distance, to the point that distance becomes irrelevant. Internet has big power and universal power as well because through it we can share our interest, information, opinion, hobbies; providing the plenty of possibilities and service; developing a network between people around the world and preparing *network of the networks* such as in economic, politic, and social issues and in, culture and religion. In its power and universality, the internet affects every sphere of activities. All people of all level from villages to the big cities can access it easily and with delight. Besides, in its connectivity, the internet provides ample room for people to come in interaction and communication with each other.

The question now is why are people, particularly the young generation, so interested in using the internet? What are the reasons why they really like to use the internet? Pierre Babin in his book *the Gospel in Cyberspace* gives three reasons for this: *the pleasure of surfing the Net*; *the pleasure of having a world connection*; and *the pleasure of utopia*.⁴ As the pleasure of surfing, internet is a great tracing game. Its ground is not the forest, but the computer screen, moving, glistening, with bright

³Jean-Nicolas Bazin and Jerome Cottin, *Virtual Christianity, Potential and Challenges for the Church* (Geneva: WWC Publication, 2013), 29.

⁴Pierre Babin & Angela Ann Sukowski, *The Gospel in Cyberspace, Nurturing Faith in the Internet Age* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2002), 63.

colours and sounds. It is fascinating. When I look on the screen it is always a beautiful image for me. As the pleasure of having a world connection, the Internet causes the whole world to take a breath. Getting a place like the World Wide Web (WWW) for example, means taking out part of major adventure of the time. It is a widening of one's self, participating actively in communication, at least free and planetary. Moreover, *being a part of the internet can give meaning to a person's life*. And finally as the pleasure of utopia, internet represents an alternative future, another sense of life that we can find especially in a world of declining industrial production. The key words of this future are communication and freedom, interaction and journey, technology and unlimited possibility, virtual reality and ecology.

4. The Challenges

Realizing those facts above, we have to be aware this fact that the Net is much more than new technology – *it is a civilization shift*⁵ which becomes the big challenge for us today. Why? The internet actually is not just giving us a lot of facilities, possibilities, services to communicate or to express ourselves but *it has already changed our whole life such as attitude, behavior, mind both individually and collectively*. If we are not able to use it according to the truth and virtues and our purpose, we are going to loose our sense of faith, our identity as human being. This fear was realized by Jean-Nicolas:

The emergency of cyber-culture is profoundly changing the way in which the world exists, changes and is transmitted to the human mind. Relations between minds

⁵Cf. Jean-Nicolas Bazin and Jerome Cottin, Ibid., 31.

are changing. The nature of matter is changing. Humanity is mutating.⁶

The Church in its past as well realized this shift. Pope Pius XII in his encyclical exhortation *Miranda Prorsus* reminds us that we have to welcome media not only with great joy but *also with a motherly care and watchfulness, having in mind to protect her children from every danger as the set out on this new path of progress.*⁷

The following are the challenges of civilization shift that can be experienced in our society today.

- *Individual versus interpersonal communication.* Because of the effect of the Internet, the individual aspect is more dominant than interpersonal communication. Most people lack interpersonal communication one with another. In fact, they just focus themselves to cell phone, iPod and computer as their best friends to communicate. They are pleased to interact and to communicate with all means of communication in the virtual world rather than communicating to fellow men their face to face. We can find these realities in our families and in our communities. For example, we are in the same room such as a dining room, a living room or a recreation room, but sometimes we are not able to communicate and even share to each other because everyone is continuously busy with his/her private communication. Consequently, most people become individualistic.

⁶Jen- Nicolas, Ibid, 32.

⁷Pope Pius XII, *Miranda Prorsus*, *The Encyclical Letter on Motion Pictures, Radio and TV*, September 8, 1957, No. 4.

- *Virtual community versus living (or real) community.* I personally realize that sometimes most of the communities *are not real communities* anymore because of the members of the community live by their own ways without caring for the other. Cyberspace community seems more pleasurable than the real community. The consequence is, they lose the sense of a living community or communion of a community. “Our body” is in the real community but “our mind and our soul” are in the virtual community. We have to be aware that the living community is the real community which we are part of. In the living community we are able “to be” rather than in the virtual community.
- *The authentic social life.* In *the society of spectacle*, 1967 Guy DeBore as author describes properly that because of mass media (internet) our social life had been replaced with mere representations, eroding our critical abilities, our knowledge and our perception. Guy DeBore mentions that now we are living in an entertainment society or public image or now we live in a spectacular society. However, modern society is accumulating infinite spectacles. All that was real once, had become mere representations⁸. It means that in the society of spectacle, spectacle is not a collection of images – rather it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images. In this case, we see that the orientation of social life become decadence from *being to having* and *from having to appearing*, namely appearing of the image. The consequence is, people actually lack of authenticity, human

⁸DeBora Guy, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 1967, 57.

perceptions are affected, lack of critical thoughts and degradation of knowledge.⁹

- *Real versus virtual.* The Internet culture makes it difficult to distinguish between the real and the virtual. Jean-Nicolas mentions that because of using the internet we are blurring the borders between the real and the virtual, so we are no longer very sure which world we are in. There is often substitution, with the virtual becoming true reality.¹⁰
- Living in the “relativism”. Because of the effect of mass media (internet) we are now living in relativism. Benedict XVI defined this term as the TRUTH is relative to particular societies or a cognitive system or historical epochs.¹¹ Hence, the values of the truth may differ from place to place.

5. Consequences for Communicating the Faith

The modern media such as internet actually are a continuation of God’s communication to people since the beginning of mankind. Through their communication, humans become “assistants” of God. Facing all things above we ask ourselves: “How can the internet serve our Church and our faith? There are some consequences that we can point out:

1. Internet culture should be seen as an *opportunity to evangelize*. In the context of Church mission, it is being called “*E-evangelism*.”¹²

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Jen-Nicolas Bazin, Ibid., 33.

¹¹Franz Josef-Eilers (ed), *Social Communication in Religious Tradition of Asia* (Manila: Logos Divine Publication, Inc., 2006), 152.

¹²Ibid., 264.

It is the systematic attempt to use internet and cyberspace for evangelizing and communicating. It uses different possibilities of the Net to share the Gospel of the Lord. The main purpose of using the internet is to *make the face of God seen and heard*. This purpose was emphasized well by saint John Paul II : “ *The internet causes billions of images to appear on millions of computer monitor around the planet. From this galaxy of sight and sound will the face of Christ emerge and the voice of Christ be heard ? For it is only when his face is seen and his voice is heard that the world will know the glad tidings of our redemption.*”¹³

2. *The use of internet has to be grounded on the aims and purpose of modern communication in order to educate, to inform, to entertain, to enlighten, and to encourage each other.*

Pope Pius XII mentioned that the aims and purpose of modern communication is to *serve truth and virtue; to bring the people to a closer and deeper understanding of each other; to perfect human life particularly in giving news, imparting instruction and presenting entertainment; to provide a broader culture background and to train the mind of people.*¹⁴ This is a good reminder for those who really like to use means of communication.

3. *Internet as tool to serve the whole humanity.*

In fact, because of *falsifying image* through activities such as advertisements, promotion, campaign internet, etc., people very

¹³John Paul II, *Message for the 36th World Communication Day*, 2002.

¹⁴Pope Pius XII, *Ibid.*, No. 45F.

often fall in the wrong choices to the offered commodities in the consumer society. They even lose their critical mind in controlling themselves. In this reality, the role and the function of mass media (internet) must be placed in their actual functions. Benedict XVI mentioned that, *new communication technology (internet) must be placed at the service of the integral good of the individual and the whole humanity*.¹⁵

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¹⁵Pope Benedict XVI, *Message of the Holy Father Benedict XVI for the 43rd World Communication Day: Truth, Proclamation and Authentically of Life in Digital Age*, June, 5, 2011.