Catholic Social Teaching in the Digital Age

Paul Tighe, Pontifical Council for Culture

The relationship between Catholic Social Teaching (CST) and the 'so-called' Digital Age is a complex one. It is clear that digitalization and the associated technological developments and applications raise issues that will become part of the content of CST. Perhaps the most obvious of these are questions concerning the future of employment in a world where increased mechanization and developments in the area of artificial intelligence and machine learning are already impacting employment and where the arrival of the 'gig economy' is obliging us to rethink many of our traditional models for reflecting on relationships between employees and employers. Existing reflection on the role of finance has been complicated by the emergence of new forms of electronic currencies and 'fintech' in general. The business models of the social media companies which focus on the harvesting of data from consumers, often without their full awareness, and on competition for their attention, with a 'race to the bottom' in terms of the production of content that attracts and retains their interest, pose particular difficulties for those concerned about corporate social responsibility. The global nature and the economic power of these companies further stresses already fragile structures for trans-national regulation and governance. I would not wish to underestimate the importance of examining these and other emerging issues, nor would I wish to suggest that they are amenable to easy solutions, but I am relatively confident we will find within the established insights, values and reflections that constitute CST the intellectual and ethical resources that will allow us to address them intelligently and coherently. The more radical problems become evident, however, when we consider the cultural context within which those who might wish to develop and promote CST are called to operate.

Cultural transformation

It is necessary that we recognise the significance of the changes through which are living. The digital age is not just an epoch of technological revolution but also, and perhaps more

profoundly, a time of cultural transformation. The last twenty five years have seen an exponential rate of development in the capacities of the technologies available to support and facilitate human communication and social interaction. The combination of these developments in mobile telephony, computer technology, fibre-optics and satellites mean that many of us now carry with us devices that allow us instant access to an extra-ordinary range of information, news and opinion from around the globe and that enable us to communicate by word, text or the sharing of images with people and institutions in every corner of the world. This revolution in information and communication technologies, however, cannot be adequately understood merely in instrumental terms: it is not simply a question of communication, connectivity and the exchange of information growing in terms of volume, speed, efficiency and accessibility but rather that we are also witnessing concomitant changes in the ways in which people use, and are conditioned by, these technologies in their efforts to communicate, form opinion, engage in politics and ultimately live together. CST is challenged to reflect on these cultural changes which have social, philosophical and anthropological resonances and which require a critical re-evaluation of the environment in which civil and political discourse must take place.

Beyond optimism

Political and social developments in the last year have probably served to disabuse us of any naïve optimism concerning the capacity of digital technologies to make our world a better place. It is important to remember, however, that only 4 years ago, Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen, concluded that *'the best thing anyone can do to improve the quality of life around the world is to drive connectivity and technological opportunity. When given the access, the people will do the rest'*[1]. To be fair, they recognized problems and difficulties but they remained unrelentingly and, from today's perspective, unrealistically upbeat – '*We will continue to encounter challenges in the physical world, but the expansion of the virtual world and what is possible online – as well as the inclusion of five billion more minds – means we will have new ways of getting information and moving resources to solve these problems, even if the solutions are imperfect'*[2]. Already in 2009, Pope Benedict had sought to warn that *'Just because social communications increase the possibilities of*

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[1] The New Digital Age: Transforming Nations, Business, and Our Lives, p. 158
[2] Ibid, p. 31

interconnection and the dissemination of ideas, it does not follow that they promote freedom or internationalize development and democracy for all. To achieve goals of this kind, they need to focus on promoting the dignity of persons and peoples, they need to be clearly inspired by charity and placed at the service of truth, of the good, and of natural and supernatural fraternity[3]. In his encyclical, Laudato Si, Pope Francis takes this argument even further and reminds us that it not a simply a question of seeking to ensure that technology is used for the right purposes but that there is a risk that our very ways of reasoning and reflecting have been conditioned by our increasing exposure to technology. *It can be said that many problems of today's world stem from the tendency, at times unconscious, to make the method and aims of science and technology an epistemological paradigm which shapes the lives of individuals and the workings of society. The effects of imposing this model on reality as a whole, human and social, are seen in the deterioration of the environment, but this is just one sign of a reductionism which affects every aspect of human and social life.*[4] Notwithstanding his seeming pessimism about the possibility of freeing ourselves from the this way of thinking, *the idea of promoting a different cultural paradigm and employing technology as a mere instrument is nowadays inconceivable. The technological paradigm has become so dominant that it would be difficult to do without its resources and even more difficult to utilize them without being dominated by their internal logic;*[5] he proposes that *there needs to be a distinctive way of looking at things, a way of thinking, policies, an educational programme, a lifestyle and a spirituality which together generate resistance to the assault of the technocratic paradigm.*[6] In particular he challenges believers to foster this new way of seeing and understanding our world and our social structures: *We need to develop a new synthesis capable of overcoming the false arguments of recent centuries. Christianity, in fidelity to its own identity and the rich deposit of truth which it has received from Jesus Christ, continues to reflect on these issues in fruitful dialogue with changing historical situations. In doing so, it reveals its eternal newness.*[7]

Although Pope Francis developed his reflection on the need for a new paradigm in the context of his reflection on the environment, it is clear that such a shift in thinking is

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[3] Caritas in veritate, 73.
[4] Laudato Si, 107.
[5] Ibid, 108.
[6] Ibid, 111.
[7] Ibid, 121.

necessary if we are to contribute to the healing of the cultural deformations which have rendered civic and political discourse more shrill and problematic and consequently less effective in helping individuals and societies to reason together and to find ways of cohabiting peacefully and with mutual respect. Many of the greatest threats to our future from climate change to food insecurity, and from war and terrorism to criminality, can only be addressed by shared refection and agreed forms of action. I would like to indicate some of the dynamics of contemporary discourse which I believe may render more difficult the types of conversations that are necessary to promote individual and social well-being.[8]

Recovering a commitment to truth

The most obvious, and probably least controversial, need is to encourage all those involved in the dissemination of news and information to be attentive to the destructive legacy of 'fake news' in what some commentators are now calling a 'post-truth' era. The commitment to truth that should be the hall-mark of the activities of those who work professionally in this area is obvious. In the area of professional ethics, the attempt to articulate ethical responsibilities usually proceeds from an analysis of the fundamental human needs that the profession strives to serve. Even the most superficial reflection will reveal that a concern for truth should be a core ethical value for communicators. This intuition was articulated by Pope Benedict in May 2008: *It is self-evident that at the heart of any serious reflection on the nature and purpose of human communications there must be an engagement with questions of truth. A communicator can attempt to inform, to educate, to entertain, to convince, to comfort; but the final worth of any communication lies in its truthfulness … The art of communication is by its nature linked to an ethical value, to the virtues that are the foundation of morality.[9]* This fundamental commitment to truth in the dissemination and sharing of information and knowledge is necessary to enable individuals make responsible choices and societies to flourish. *The media are called to serve human dignity by helping people live well and function as persons in community. Media do this by encouraging men and women to be conscious of their dignity, enter into the thoughts and feelings of others, cultivate a sense of mutual responsibility, and grow in personal freedom,*

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[8] While Sherry Turkle, Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age (2015), has highlighted the sociological and psychological necessity of recovering the art of 'face to face' conversation, my concern in this speech is to examine the broader necessity to rehabilitate public discourse.
[9] Pope Benedict, Address to School and Faculties of Communications, 2008.

in respect for others' freedom, and in the capacity for dialogue.[10] Good media are indispensable for democratic societies: they provide information about events and important policy issues, about politicians and other public figures. They enable leaders to communicate quickly and directly about matters of significant public concern. Ultimately, they provide the public with the information they will use to make intelligent judgements and to determine their choices in elections. Alan Rusbridger (the former Editor of the Guardian) has pointed out that: *As journalists we would like it to be self-evident that what we do is as crucial to democracy as a clean water supply or a fire service*.[11] Given the importance of media for the functioning of democracy, it is obvious that certain responsibilities follow. Already in 2002 ,in one of the most interesting and indeed prophetic reflections on the issue of media ethics and responsibility, the British philosopher Onora O'Neill highlighted the importance of trust in enabling social life to flourish. She spoke of the important role of the media in holding various interest groups to account and in scrutinizing their trust-worthiness but she stressed the resultant responsibility on it to exercise this role responsibly: *If the media mislead, or if readers cannot assess their reporting, the wells of public discourse and public life are poisoned. The new information technologies may be anti-authoritarian, but curiously they are often used in ways that are also anti-democratic. They undermine our capacities to judge others' claims and to place our trust.*[12]

In the context of digital media, it is worth noting that the ethical responsibility of individual journalists, and of the media as a whole, is both magnified and threatened. A particular result of the changes in the structures of journalism is that increasingly smaller numbers of professional journalists are expected to handle ever greater volumes of information. There is an ever present danger that the journalists will not be in a position to deal critically and in depth with this so-called "information overload".   There is real danger that our cultural discourse becomes superficial. One commentator has expressed this risk succinctly: *Visual and electronic media, today's dominant media, need a certain kind of content. They thrive*

[10] Pontifical Council for Social Communications, Ethics in Communications, 2000.
[11] Guardian, 6/9/2011.
[12] A Question of Trust: Reith Lectures 2002.

on brevity, speed, change, urgency, variety and feelings. But thinking requires the opposite. Thinking takes time. It needs silence and the methodical skills of logic.[13]

Challenging the tenets of unarticulated post-modernism

Good thinking clearly takes time and it is necessary if, as individuals and societies, we are to make good decisions. I think it is also necessary, but perhaps less obvious, that we must be attentive to some intellectual and philosophical presuppositions that have become embodied in our culture and that have adversely impacted the human capacity to make good decisions both as individuals and collectively. The current crisis concerning 'truth' cannot, I believe, be blamed only on digitalization and new media but also has roots in post-modernity. *Digitalization may be considered as the technical foundation of social-cultural developments. Culture was already developing in a postmodern direction. Digitalization, however, works like a catalyst. It makes that some processes that are considered as typically postmodern become visible and unavoidable swifter … think of individualization, the predominance of particularities over unity, the failure of metanarratives, and, consequently, the absence of a shared view of the past and a shared hope for the future, the preference for experience and emotion.*[14] I think CST must challenge some of the often unarticulated, and unacknowledged, forms of relativism that characterize contemporary culture. Even the so-called mainstream media, and public intellectuals in general, must be willing to ask themselves whether that methodological scepticism, particularly in matters affecting the public interest, which is a feature of much reporting and commentary (and which is not without its benefits in society), has not become distorted to the extent that we are often confronted with a type of cynicism in which all claims to truth and beauty are routinely rejected, ignored or regarded disdainfully.

Within academic schools of philosophy it is common to distinguish between fundamental or foundational ethics and special or applied ethics. While the attention of the latter focuses on specific issues and disciplines, the former tends to be concerned with more basic questions about what it means to talk of good and evil or right and wrong and how it is possible to make ethical judgments. Even though CST clearly belongs to the realm of applied ethics; it would be a great mistake not to attend to some of the material that would

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[13] Archbishop Charles Chaput, http://www.archden.org/index.cfm/ID/2417
[14] Henk Witte, Is Catholicity still an appropriate concept in a postmodern world? 2014

normally be associated with fundamental ethics. In particular, it is important that the public would be encouraged to study the different ethical theories and to engage critically with the, often implicit, influence of these theories on contemporary debates about ethics and on their own ethical reasoning. Without even being aware of it, many people in their approach to ethics are guided by insights that are rooted in utilitarianism (the end justifies the means), positivism (what is legal is ethical), emotivism (our feelings can tell us what is right and wrong) or relativism (there are no absolutes in the area of ethics). There is a real value in asking the people to study these theories, and to become more aware of their limitations, so that they can begin to examine explicitly and critically their own, often unacknowledged, criteria for judging right and wrong. One is reminded of the observation of Maynard Keynes concerning academic economic theories: *The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back. I am sure that the power of vested interests is vastly exaggerated compared with the gradual encroachment of ideas.*[15] Similarly in the area of ethics and ethical reflection, people may be operating with ideas that they have assimilated from the general cultural milieu and which they presume to be normative and trustworthy even though said ideas may have been critiqued and their inadequacies exposed by subsequent academic reflection.

CST needs to draw attention to those objective ethical theories, such as the natural moral law tradition, which are rooted in the conviction that the rightness or wrongness of human ethical choices can be discerned by a process of reflection on what it means to be human. Choices which, by their very nature, promote the human flourishing of individuals and society are judged to be good; while those that are intrinsically damaging to the well-being of persons and of human community are judged to be bad. These objective theories, which are best understood as involving a commitment to a method of moral reasoning rather than as providing a shortcut to truth, require that humans work together to decide which choices and practises are to be encouraged and which should be discouraged. This discernment

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[15] The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money, 1936.

requires a careful consideration of all the relevant perspectives that are brought to ethical debates by different protagonists so that our human efforts to work out what is ethical are as objective as possible. These theories promote a dialogical approach to ethics, that is accessible to all human beings notwithstanding their religious or ideological differences, and provide a theoretical underpinning for the possibility of the genuine public debating of ethical issues. It is a shared commitment to searching for truth, rooted in the conviction of the ultimate objectivity of truth, which gives such debates their ultimate value – otherwise they become exercises in coercion and manipulation in which each seeks to assert his or her own view without any reference to the claims of truth. Pope Francis highlighted the dangers of what he calls 'practical relativism' which he argues is even more dangerous than doctrinal relativism. *In the absence of objective truths or sound principles other than the satisfaction of our own desires and immediate needs, what limits can be placed on human trafficking, organized crime, the drug trade, commerce in blood diamonds and the fur of endangered species? … when the culture itself is corrupt and objective truth and universally valid principles are no longer upheld, then laws can only be seen as arbitrary impositions or obstacles to be avoided.*[16]

Humanizing civic and political discourse

Although much of my attention has been focussed on the need for professional communicators and public commentators to be attentive to their privileged responsibility for fostering public discourse; it is important to address a wider public, and to invite all believers, and indeed people of good will generally, to be attentive to their own practises in order to foster good and constructive habits which will promote discourse. This is particularly important in the context of social media where the traditional distinctions between the consumers and the producers of content are not so clear. Commentators frequently speak of *user generated content* with reference to the social networks but it is important to recognise that the very *culture* of the social networks is user generated. If the networks are to be spaces where good positive communications can help to promote individual and social well-being then the users, the people who make up the networks, need to be attentive to the type of content they are creating and sharing. Research has pointed

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[16] Laudato Si, 123.

to the increasing importance of the social networks in forming human identity[17]; in this context it is ever more urgent that we are attentive to ensure that these environments are safe and humanly enriching.

Good discourse is a human rather than a technical achievement; those attitudes and commitments which facilitate meaningful engagement between people and peoples must be nourished and encouraged. It is self-obvious that the networks can only be truly social if users avoid all forms of anti-social behaviour and expression. If networks are to realize their potential to be a forum to help people grow in understanding and appreciation of each other, then we should seek to be respectful in our modes of expression. Human discourse will only be fruitful when aggressive forms of expression are avoided. People will only express themselves fully when they are confident that their views are welcomed and not merely tolerated. As a community we can only grow in knowledge and insight if all feel free to contribute with honesty and authenticity. A particular sense of personal responsibility is especially required from those who engage anonymously in discussions and debates. Although social media often offer greater visibility to those who are most provocative or strident in their style of presentation, true understanding is best nourished by reasoned debate, logical argumentation and gentle persuasion. CST must remind Catholic schools and Universities in particular of the need to form students in these skills and habits.

If people are not encouraged to engage intelligently with different views, the risk is that they will become closed in by their own pre-established world view and that they will be confirmed in their own opinions and prejudices rather than helped to search for truth and understanding. In the political arena, there is the risk that people will only engage with media that they know to support their particular views and they will not be exposed to alternative positions or to reasoned debate or discussion. They become trapped in 'echo chambers' or 'cocoons', hearing only the voices of those who agree with them.[18] This is turn will create increasingly polarized and confrontational forms of politics where there is little room for the voices of moderation or consensus. If the digital networks are to achieve their potential in promoting human solidarity, the art of dialogue must be recovered. When people listen to the 'other ' and allow his or her voice to breach their defensiveness, they

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[17] Government Office for Science, Foresight Future Identities, London, 2013

[18] Cass Sunstein, Going to Extremes: How like minds unite and divide, 2009.

open themselves to growth in understanding. If they are willing to listen to others, they will learn to see the world with different eyes and will grow in appreciation of the richness of the human experience as revealed in other cultures and traditions. The more people grow in knowledge of others, the more they grow also in self-knowledge. *We have to be able to dialogue with the men and women of today …. We are challenged to be people of depth, attentive to what is happening around us and spiritually alert. To dialogue means to believe that the "other" has something worthwhile to say, and to entertain his or her point of view and perspective.*[19]   Engagement with others alerts people to those basic desires to love and be loved, for protection and security, for meaning and purpose that are shared by all humans. Attentiveness to the human condition, and to the one world which all share, highlights the truth that these desires can only be satisfied fully if people construct a society that is committed to a shared concern for the well-being of all rather than to an ethos of unbridled competition where the happiness of some can only be achieved at the expense of others.

Conclusion

Pope Francis has spoken of the need to start a new conversation, for a new form of dialogue. *"I urgently appeal, then, for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation that includes everyone, since the environment challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all."*[20] If CST is not attentive to the need to promote such dialogue and to establish the conditions that are necessary for it to prosper, its own valuable insights and contributions will , at worst, be lost in a cacophony of voices speaking at cross purposes which only serve to consolidate division and polarization or, at best, find an audience only among those who already share its conclusions.[21]

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[19] Pope Francis, World Communications Day Message, 2014.
[20] Laudato Si, 14.
[21]"**This paper has been prepared at the request of the Centesimus Annus pro Pontifice Foundation for a consultation organized jointly with Universidad Pontificia Comillas ICAI-ICADE and the BBVA Group in Madrid, January 26-27, 2017. The papers are circulated under the author's responsibility to elicit comments and to encourage debate; the views therein expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the CAPP Foundation**".