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The approach of Pope Benedict XVI to media and digital culture in Catholic social thought

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ABSTRACT

At a time when there has been a technological development and a renewal in the field of communication, the Church has been implementing its Social Doctrine on the media and the digital world. In his official documents, and with the theology of communication as a background, Benedict XVI has explored ethical implications of new ways of communicating. This study aims to analyse the content in which the German Pope has addressed the media and digital culture. The conclusions of the research show the thought of the Pontiff on the technological progress, the ethics of information, the impact of media today, the promotion of media education, the use of Internet and social media, and the implementation of digital technology as a vehicle for evangelisation.

1. Introduction

Since Vatican II promulgated the Decree on the Media of Social Communications *Inter Mirifica* (Second Vatican Council 1963), official Church documents have given significant emphasis to the meaning and implications of the information industry. In academia, the importance of communication in the life of the Church from its very beginning has already been researched (Baragli 1973). In addition, some official Church texts from 1936 to 1996 have been collected (Eilers 1993), and others up to 2005 (Cebollada 2005). The technological transformation of the last two decades and the large number of ecclesial documents that have studied the impact of communication and digitalisation on society, make it necessary to advance in this line of research. This is not only to reconstruct the Church's vision in this field, but also to place the documents of Pope Benedict XVI in context of the social, religious, and technological background, as well as in the context of his life and other work. It is also relevant to infer the ethical implications of the texts under study might have upon a near future in which there is increasingly no distinction between physical and digital reality. For this

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reason, research into Catholic social thought on communication must continue to develop. These motives are behind the analysis of the content in Benedict XVI's ecclesial documents that deals with media and digital culture.

The main objective of this study is to present the Social Doctrine of the Church with regard to the media in the Pontificate of Benedict XVI. To this end, the official documents in which the Pope theologian has reflected on communication have been classified, and the contents have been analysed. His encyclicals, some of his apostolic exhortations and, especially, his messages on World Communications Days are the primary sources for this research (see Table 1).

Firstly, the study briefly outlines the way media and digital culture were addressed from Vatican II to the Pontificate of John Paul II. Secondly, it is followed by a brief biographical summary of Benedict XVI's life and work. Finally, it presents the chapter under investigation, which analyses Benedict XVI's thoughts on technology, the ethics of communication, the significance and transcendence of the media in society, the relationship between the media and education, the new forms of communication provided by the Internet, the advantages and limits of social media, and the use of the media in the Church as an instrument of evangelisation.

2. Media and digital culture in Catholic social thought

The Vatican II establishes the foundations of the cornerstones of Catholic social thought in relation to media. The Decree on the Media of Social Communications stresses that the ecclesial community welcomes and promotes technical inventions that 'have uncovered new avenues of communicating most readily news, views and teachings of every sort' (Second Vatican Council 1963, no. 1). The conciliar text provides the doctrinal principles of the mass media, outlining their meaning and appropriate use. According to the Decree, media 'can be of great service to mankind, since they greatly contribute to men's entertainment and instruction as well as to the spread and support of the Kingdom of God' (Second Vatican Council 1963, no. 2). In addition, the text emphasizes that the media are a fundamental vehicle for the Church's mission of evangelisation, calling for their use in dioceses and in various apostolic activities (Second Vatican Council 1963, no. 3, 20). However, since the ARPANET was still under development at the time, there is no reference to the network in the document (Abbate 1994, 80).

In the post-conciliar period, the Pastoral Instruction *Communio et Progressio* was given the task of understanding social communication in the light of Vatican II, defining the aims of the press, cinema, radio, and television as 'the unity and advancement of men living in society' (Pontifical Council for Social Communications [PCSC] 1971, no. 1). The document addresses the contribution of the media to human progress, highlighting topics such as public opinion, the right to information, education, culture, entertainment, artistic expression, and advertising (nos. 19–62). The Pastoral Instruction also focuses on training, obligation and cooperation between recipients and communicators for its proper use, as well as the commitment that Catholic media must undertake with public opinion inside and outside the Church (nos. 63–179).

Table 1. Documents of Pope Benedict XVI on Communication.

Documents	Contents
Deus caritas est (2005)	First encyclical written by Pope Benedict XVI, in which he addresses the issue of Christian love.
The Media: A Network for Communication, Communion and Cooperation. Message of the Holy Father for 40th World Communications Day (2006)	Benedict XVI's first message for World Communications Day, in which he reflects on the media as a network that promotes communication, communion and cooperation.
Sacramentum Caritatis: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Eucharist as the Source and Summit of the Church's Life and Mission (2007)	A Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Eucharist that seeks to include the variety of the insights and proposals arising from the Eleventh Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, as well as to offer some orientations for the renewal of Eucharistic enthusiasm in the Church.
Children and the Media: A Challenge for Education. Message of the Holy Father for 41st World Communications Day (2007)	Document for World Communications Day that reflects on the relationship between children, media, and education.
Spe salvi (2007)	Benedict XVI's second encyclical, in which he presents Christian Hope.
The Media: At the Crossroads between Self-Promotion and Service. Searching for the Truth in order to Share it with Others. Message of the Holy Father for the 42nd World Communications (2008)	Document for World Communications Day that focuses on the role of the media in the lives of individuals and society.
New Technologies, New Relationships. Promoting a Culture of Respect, Dialogue and Friendship. Message of the Holy Father for 43rd World Communications Day (2009)	Message for World Communications Day in which Benedict XVI reflects on insights regarding the potential of new technologies, if they are used to promote human understanding and solidarity.
Caritas in veritate (2009)	Benedict XVI's third encyclical, in which he presents the theme of integral human development in charity and truth.
The Priest and Pastoral Ministry in a Digital World: New Media at the Service of the Word. Message of the Holy Father for 44th World Communications Day (2010)	Document for World Communications Day that focuses on the pastoral field of digital communications and supports the view that priests could discover new possibilities for carrying out their ministry in the digital culture.
Verbum Domini: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church (2010)	A Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Word of God in the life and mission of the Church, to present the results of the Twelfth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops sessions.
Truth, Proclamation and Authenticity of Life in the Digital Age. Message of the Holy Father for the 45th World Communications Day (2011)	Message for World Communications Day in which Benedict XVI explores the emergence of the Internet as a communication network with opportunities for establishing relationships and building fellowship.
Africae Munus: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace (2011)	A Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Church in Africa, in the light of the results of the Second Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops, in search of reconciliation, justice and peace.
Silence and Word: Path of Evangelization. Message of the Holy Father for the 46th World Communications Day (2012)	Document for World Communications Day on the relationship between silence and word, two aspects of communication that, according to Benedict XVI, must be integrated to achieve an authentic dialogue.
Social Networks: portals of truth and faith; new spaces for evangelization. Message of the Holy Father for the 47th World Communications Day (2013)	Benedict XVI's last message for World Communications Day in which he offers some reflections on social media.

Later on, the Church no longer conceived the media in an instrumental perspective and developed its thinking towards a cultural approach, which involved the adaptation of language and pastoral plans to integrate the Christian message into the communicative culture (John Paul II 1990, no. 37). 'At the dawn of a new era,' Pastoral Instruction *Aetatis Novae*

aims to apply the Church's previous teachings on the media to the new emerging realities (PCSC 1992, no. 1). Considering that the world of communication is 'the first Areopagus of the modern age' (John Paul II 1990, no. 37), *Aetatis Novae* examines how in the penultimate decade of the twentieth century, communication technology underwent profound transformations (PCSC 1992, no. 1–6). The document defines the tasks of the media (nos. 6–11) and its current challenges (nos. 12–15), and outliness the pastoral approach of media professionals (nos. 16–21). Its Appendix provides strategic elements for the elaboration of pastoral plans in ecclesial contexts in which the media may be integrated (nos. 23–33).

Although John Paul II reflected on the Internet in different World Communications Days, it was not until the year 2000 that the first document of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications explored the digital phenomenon. From an ethical approach, the text includes the Internet in addressing both the positive and negative effects of the media. The document states that the Internet 'conquer barriers of distance and isolation, bringing learning opportunities to villagers in remote areas, cloistered religious, the home-bound, prisoners, and many others' (PCSC 2000, no. 10), while warning that this particular media 'raises concerns about some of the radically new consequences it brings: a loss of the intrinsic value of items of information, an undifferentiated uniformity in messages that are reduced to pure information, a lack of responsible feedback and a certain discouragement of interpersonal relationships' (no. 24). The Pontifical Council, while noting that the new media offer considerable advantages, asks whether they will be committed to the common good, and whether the web of the future, instead of representing a global community, could become a network of isolated individuals (no. 29).

Afterward, for the first time, two specific documents on virtual reality were produced. Firstly, *Ethics in Internet* focuses on the use of the web for the common good and, considering it as a beneficial source, shows its characteristic features: instantaneity, immediacy, universality, interactivity, flexibility, adaptability, and horizontality. The document also expresses concern about issues such as the so-called digital divide, freedom of information, censorship, globalisation, education, defamation, cyber-terrorism, lack of regulation, privacy, and the active presence of the Church in the digital environment (PCSC 2002a, no. 1–18). Secondly, *The Church and Internet* addresses the opportunities and challenges of the digital media for the Catholic Church. Beyond conceiving the media as a technical instrument, the document considers that they represent the realisation of Trinitarian communication, which is the essence of the Church (PCSC 2002b, no. 3). The document also notes that the ecclesial community needs to understand the Internet and explore the opportunities it offers for evangelisation and participation in 'virtual communities of faith' (PCSC 2002b, no. 5). The last document in John Paul II's Pontificate that was entirely focused on the media was issued two months before the Pontiff's death. *The Rapid Development* considers the Internet to be an important instrument of evangelisation. Assuming communication as a theological place, the text calls for training, participation, and dialogue in this industry (John Paul II 2005).

3. The legacy of Benedict XVI in Catholic social thought

Joseph Aloisius Ratzinger was born in Marktl am Inn, Bavaria, on 16 April 1927 (Nichols 2005, 5). His childhood was marked by his entry into St. Michael's Minor

Seminary in Traunstein, in a political context in which National Socialism was beginning to emerge. In fact, seminarians were obliged to register with the Hitler Youth established by the National Socialist German Workers' Party (Nichols 2005, 6, 13). After his military service, Ratzinger studied theology and philosophy at the Freising Academy of Philosophy and at the Ducal Georgianum of the University of Munich, where he was particularly interested in authors such as St. Augustine of Hippo and St. Bonaventure (Blanco 2006, 23–31).

In the early 1950s, Ratzinger received the sacrament of priestly ordination, began teaching at Freising College, and completed his dissertation on St. Augustine (Ratzinger 1954). After obtaining his teaching habilitation with a study of St. Bonaventure (Ratzinger 1959),[1] he taught at the University of Bonn and the University of Münster and worked as an expert witness at the Second Vatican Council, assisting Cardinal Josef Frings as theological advisor (Söding 2007, 27–32). Ratzinger is deeply marked by the experience of the Council, especially in the areas of ecumenism, theology of ministry, homiletics, eschatology and Mariology (Blanco 2011). After his time in Rome, where he was seen as a young reformist theologian, he found a position at the University of Tübingen from 1966 to 1969, where he maintained his distance from the Marxist student movement (Tornielli 2005, 72–73). That year, he entered upon a position at the University of Regensburg, where he became Dean and Vice-Rector (Nichols 2005, 24). His publications from this period include a collection of university lectures on the profession of apostolic faith (Ratzinger 2004) and an anthology of reflections on pastoral work (Ratzinger 2011) Furthermore, in collaboration with other theologians, he founded the theological journal *Communio* (Rowland 2008, 21).

In 1977, Ratzinger was consecrated archbishop of Munich and Freising, and a few months later became a cardinal (Nichols 2005, 24–26). In 1981, Ratzinger began a new stage when he was appointed Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (Seewald 2006, 281). During his time in office, Pope John Paul II entrusted him with the preparation of a new Catechism of the Catholic Church, which was released in 1992. His tenure as Prefect was not without controversy, which arose due to his correcting the works of some theologians or even banning some of them from teaching within the Catholic institution.[2] Similarly, his writings on contraception (Ratzinger 1987), homosexuality (2003), liberation theology (1984), and inter-religious dialogue (2000), did not help the cardinal's good credit in the more open-minded sectors of the Church and in the secular world (Seewald 2006, 283–289). As bishop and Prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Ratzinger was interested in the theology of creation, the Eucharistic mystery, the relationship between Christ and other religions, and the Christian roots of Europe (Blanco 2011). Moreover, one of the hallmarks of his time as Prefect was his attachment to the Magisterium and the Deposit of Faith as the basis for the struggle against moral relativism and secularisation (Allen 2001, 9).

On 19 April 2005, Cardinal Ratzinger began a new journey in his life when he was elected Pope (Seewald 2006, 84). Among the writings of his legacy as Pope, it is noteworthy to mention the first encyclical, *Deus caritas est,* which presented God's love for human beings, the possibility for them to love God and neighbour, and the Church's duty to practise and teach charity (Benedict XVI 2005). The pontiff's second encyclical, *Spe Salvi*, reflected on Christian hope, exploring its consequences for the contemporary

time and its transcendent meaning beyond the frontier of this life (Benedict XVI 2007d). The third encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, was intended as a recognition of Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio* on the fortieth anniversary of its publication, and hence should have been published in 2007. However, due to the economic crisis that began that year, it was issued two years later to better respond to the needs of the time (Benedict XVI 2009a). In this third encyclical, in continuity with previous pontiffs (López-Casquete de Prado and Margenat Peralta 2013), Benedict XVI proposed integral human development, exploring the human being's openness to love in truth, and the logic of love into the market for the construction of a human society (Benedict XVI 2009b).

In addition, it is important to highlight his apostolic exhortations on the Eucharist (Benedict XVI 2007b), the Word of God (Benedict XVI 2010a), the Church in Africa (Benedict XVI 2011a), and the Church in the Middle East (Benedict XVI 2012a), which are the fruit of various synodal works. During his Pontificate, he also released three books on the life of Jesus (Benedict XVI 2007a, 2011b, 2012b), as well as Apostolic Letters, Apostolic Constitutions and several speeches, homilies and messages. His relationship with the media during his Pontificate, although tense at times, has been marked by a balance between the eloquence of the word and the power of silence (Blanco 2018, 87). These principles are expressed in the writings in which he addresses the phenomenon of communication.

4. Benedict XVI's perspective on media and digital culture

This part of the study, which is the focus of this research, presents Benedict XVI's thoughts on media and digital culture, addressing the following issues: the meaning of technology, the ethics of communication, the impact of the media on society, the relationship between the media and education, the new forms of communication provided by the Internet, the advantages and limits of social media, and the use of the media in the Church.

4.1. Technology to serve the human being

Increasingly, technology is having a greater impact on humanity. It has even been said that the world is, by definition, technological, as it is impossible to separate society and culture from the field of technology (Lévy 2001, 3–5). As a result, the Fourth Industrial Revolution will lead to a digital transformation, in which physical and online reality will be completely integrated—physical to digital to physical—(Castells 1996). Nowadays, it is proposed to address the study of technology from different fields, including Phenomenology, Religious Sciences and Theology (George 2006). In regard to digital technology, different perspectives (Campbell 2013) and methodologies (Campbell and Garner 2016) have been conducted for research in the subfields of Religious Studies. Three possible responses can be found in relation to technology: an optimistic, a pessimistic and an ambiguous vision. The latter view of technology considers the way it is developed and applied in society (Barbour 1993, 19). Hence, the

question arises as to how the Church views technology, and this section of the study attempts to answer this issue in light of Benedict XVI's Pontificate.

According to the Social Doctrine of the Church, technology is a profound human reality linked to the freedom of the human being (Second Vatican Council 1965a, no. 57; Paul VI 1967, no. 41). In continuity with the earlier Social Doctrine, Benedict XVI affirms that 'technology enables us to exercise dominion over matter, to reduce risks, to save labour, to improve our conditions of life' (Benedict XVI 2009b, no. 69). In fact, he believes that the progress of technology offers new possibilities for good, but also for evil if this advance comes into the wrong hands, due to the possibility of the manipulation of consciences (Benedict XVI 2008, no. 3). Consequently, and as a result of his theological thinking that all human achievements are a gift of God and not a fruit of purely human capacities, 'if technical progress is not matched by corresponding progress in man's ethical formation, in man's inner growth (cf. Eph 3:16; 2 Cor 4:16), then it is not progress at all, but a threat for man and for the world' (Benedict XVI 2007d, no. 22).

The German Pope believes that despite the great advances in science and technology, every day it is possible to observe the suffering that exists in the world because of different kinds of poverty, both material and spiritual (Benedict XVI 2005, no. 30) In this regard, and in continuity with the social teaching of the Church, technical development and industrialisation has created a social situation in which the working class in industry has experienced 'dreadful living conditions' (Benedict XVI 2007d, no. 20). Therefore, in the Pope's view, authentic development is not ensured merely by technical progress, but by the power of love. In this sense, the integral development of the human person goes beyond an empiricist and sceptical view of life, incapable of rising from praxis to values (Benedict XVI 2009b, no. 9). Consequently, 'progress of a merely economic and technological kind is insufficient. Development needs above all to be true and integral' (no. 23).

In taking a critical view of a technology that is capable of altering reality, the Pope even quotes from the work *Novum organum* by Francis Bacon, in which the English philosopher shows a correlation between science and praxis, conceiving science as a technique that can give human beings control over creation (Benedict XVI 2007d, no. 16). Hence Benedict XVI warns of the danger of the emergence of ideologies that deny the usefulness of development itself, since in his view scientific discoveries are an opportunity for growth for all if they are used in the right way (2009b, no. 14).

The Pope outlines a theology of technology that is rooted in the second chapter of the book of Genesis, whose principal point is the command to cultivate and care for the earth, in the sense of reinforcing 'the covenant between human beings and the environment, a covenant that should mirror God's creative love' (2009b, no. 69). From the theology of creation, the Pope warns of the risks of the total technification of nature, 'because the natural environment is more than raw material to be manipulated at our pleasure; it is a wondrous work of the Creator containing a grammar which sets forth ends and criteria for its wise use, not its reckless exploitation' (2009b, no. 48). This critical view of the total technification of nature is opposed to a weak sustainability approach, which believes that natural capital can be substituted by other forms of capital (Neumayer 2013). In this respect, Benedict XVI considers the challenge of

energy problems and points to countries and groups of powers that put aside the use of renewable energy, which represents a grave obstacle to the development of poor countries. In addition to the promotion of this new ecological sensitivity, the Pope encourages not only the reduction of energy consumption and the search for alternative energies, but also the search for a 'worldwide redistribution of energy resources, so that countries lacking those resources can have access to them' 2009b, no. 49).

In terms of development cooperation, Benedict XVI believes that technologically advanced societies should not confuse their own technological progress with a presumed 'cultural superiority', for the advancement of global and community growth (2009b, no. 59). Moreover, a distorted view of technological development could encourage the idea of the self-sufficiency of technology, 'when too much attention is given to the *how* questions, and not enough to the many *why* questions underlying human activity' (no. 70). Hence, true development is not primarily about doing, but about understanding the human meaning of doing within the context of the holistic meaning of the individual's being. To overcome the technocratic cultural perspective, which emerged in the last century as a movement to reorient the economy (Akin 1977), Benedict XVI considers that human beings should go beyond a technical worldview governed by the sole criterion of efficiency and utility, to respond with freedom and moral responsibility (2009b, no. 70).

The Pope believes that, when technique becomes something absolute, there is a confusion between ends and means.[3] Indeed, 'communication seems increasingly to claim not simply to represent reality, but to determine it' (Benedict XVI 2008, no. 3). In this regard, the field of bioethics represents a bridge between the use of technology and moral responsibility (2009b, no. 74). This idea of establishing a bridge between the field of science and ethics follows the thinking of Van Rensselaer Potter as he attempted to build the discipline of bioethics (Potter 1971). Beyond the bridge between the sciences and ethics, in the Pope's view, the development of human beings must also include the spiritual dimension: 'It requires new eyes and a new heart, capable of rising above a materialistic vision of human events, capable of glimpsing in development the beyond that technology cannot give. By following this path, it is possible to pursue the integral human development that takes its direction from the driving force of charity in truth' (Benedict XVI 2009b, no. 77).

4.2. The need for a communication ethics

In the coming years, we will witness how technological advances will benefit human beings in their daily lives. However, we will also see the side effects of the misuse of technology tools. As a result, there is an urgent need to study the possible consequences of a technological device as it develops, assessing its applications, and deciding what new technologies to adopt and how to use them (Moor 2005). This is what Information Ethics and Communication Ethics address (Capurro 2005). In recent years and from different approaches, the first steps have been taken in the research on the ethical dimension of technology (Anderson and Anderson 2011; Luppicini and Adell 2009). Starting from the question of the neighbour, the Christian Ethical thinking has also initiated this process (Campbell and Garner 2016). Since an increasing number of

ecclesial documents address the communication category, it is pertinent to ask the issue about the Church's social thinking on Information Ethics, particularly in the teaching of Benedict XVI.

The Pope believes that the study of communication from an ethical perspective is an important issue. As in his third Encyclical, *Caritas in veritate*, Benedict XVI calls for bioethics to represent a bridge between the use of technology and moral responsibility (2009b, no. 74), so on the 42nd World Communications Day he expresses the desire for the need of Information Ethics or 'info-ethics' in the field of communication (2008, no. 4).

For the Pope, the role that the media have acquired in society must be framed as an essential part of the anthropological question, which is 'emerging as the key challenge of the third millennium' (2008, no. 4). Throughout his academic career as a theologian as well as throughout his papacy, Benedict XVI has expressed interest in truth, which has been a central point of his thought. In connection with communication, the Pontiff believes that the media should not become the voice of either economic materialism or ethical relativism. In this regard, the relationship between the search for journalistic truth and the pressures of power is a relevant issue in journalism today (Kapuściński 2002). Hence the need for a critical approach to the issue of ethics in the field of communication (Cheney et al. 2011).

Benedict XVI does not propose a specific model of media (Hallin and Mancini 2003), since regardless of the journalistic paradigm that a media outlet chooses to follow, the mass media industry should contribute to telling the truth about humanity, and defending it against those who would deny or destroy it: 'One might even say that seeking and presenting the truth about humanity constitutes the highest vocation of social communication' (Benedict XVI 2008, no. 5). To do so, all available technical means and languages must be used, not only by information professionals but also by users in an age where participation is crucial in the Internet era (no. 5).

4.3. The role of the media in society

Since the emergence of traditional mass media —newspapers, radio, cinema, and television— the phenomenon of communication has been increasingly important for understanding society and its culture (McQuail 1987). Furthermore, since the advent of the Internet, the media have transformed their practice, industry, and influence on citizens using digital technology (Thorburn and Jenkins 2003). Considering the significant impact of the media on society, this section addresses the role of the media, including the immediacy of digital media, according to the social thought of Benedict XVI.

Ethical journalism calls on journalists to examine their responsibilities and rights in society, and their ultimate goals (Keeble 2001). Scholars in the field of Ethics have also been concerned with the impact of the Internet on society, looking specifically at issues such as the digital divide, responsibility, cyber-attack, intellectual property, open access, privacy, anonymity, information overload, security, gender issues, freedom and censorship (Himma and Tavani 2008). Benedict XVI believes that the ultimate meaning of the media must be sought within an anthropological perspective. This means that the communication industry can produce a civilizing effect not only because of

technological advances, but above all when it is placed at the service of truth and promoting the dignity of individuals and peoples, justice, fraternity, charity, literacy, socialisation, democracy, dialogue, solidarity and the common good (Benedict XVI, 2008, no. 2, 2009b, no. 73). Digital networks are creating a new social and communication structure (Castells 1996). In this regard, in the commitment to justice and love in today's world, the mass media phenomenon has rapidly reduced the distance between very different people and cultures, so that the needs of humankind are now much more immediately known. From the Pope's point of view, this is an advantage 'to assist our neighbours in need' (2005, no. 30).[4] In this respect, Benedict XVI notes that the media are a network that facilitates 'communication, communion, and cooperation' (2006, no. 1). This horizon of life in communion takes its theological point of reference in St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians, since humanity forms one human family in which no one is a stranger (Eph 2:18–22). In this way, as expressed in the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* of Vatican II, being God's self-communicating recipients, humanity can communicate the love transmitted by Jesus of Nazareth (Second Vatican Council, 1965b, no. 2).

There is a consensus in the academic community that information is crucial to social, political, economic and cultural life (Webster 1995). From a theology of communication perspective, and as a consequence of God's self-communication and the communicative capacity of the human being, Benedict XVI emphasises that new information technologies can become powerful instruments for unity and peace or, on the contrary, for destruction and division. This is because the media can help spread both truthful and fake news, information and disinformation, formation and deformation, humanisation, and dehumanisation (Benedict XVI 2011a, no. 143). Indeed, in recent years, in the field of communication there is significant concern about the rise of fake news and its consequences (Brennen 2017). According to Benedict XVI, while the media facilitates the exchange of information, ideas and mutual understanding between different social agents (Benedict XVI 2006, no. 3), sometimes the 'immediacy of communication does not necessarily translate into the building of cooperation and communion in society' (no. 2). The media must avoid settling for partial or provisional truths instead of presenting reality (Benedict XVI 2008, no. 3), seeking to transmit the ultimate meaning of the human person in order to contribute constructively to the propagation of all that is good and true (Benedict XVI 2006, no. 2).

In the ethical field of media, as well as in other disciplines, it is essential to separate inaccurate information that may misinform the user from other news stories that are intended to withhold, deflect, or distort information (Bok 1979). In the Pope's view, the media can fall into ambiguity when it engenders a form of 'monoculture hat dims creative genius, deflates the subtlety of complex thought and undervalues the specificity of cultural practices and the particularity of religious belief' (Benedict XVI 2006, no. 3). Benedict XVI's emphasis on moral relativism is crystallised by the observation that the deformation of the meaning of media occurs when the information industry is reduced to self-serving or profit-driven operations, the sense of responsibility for the common good is lost (2006, no. 3), communication is used for ideological purposes, family and social patterns are imposed, vulgarity is resorted to in order to increase the audience, industry increases the technology gap, and it is placed at the service of the selling of

consumer products (2008, no. 2). This is why he believes that the role of a media, which aims to respond to its vocation by broadcasting truthfully and cooperating with society, is based on reporting of events, explaining facts of public interest, and fairly presenting various points of view (2006, no. 3). Hence the Pope comes to ask himself: 'Do not our hearts cry out, most especially, when our young people are subjected to debased or false expressions of love which ridicule the God-given dignity of every human person and undermine family interests?' (2006, no. 3).

Throughout his messages for World Communications Day, Benedict XVI insists on the importance of dialogue so that the Internet may be used properly, and communication may acquire value and meaning, as well as combining silence and the word: 'two aspects of communication which need to be kept in balance, to alternate and to be integrated with one another if authentic dialogue and deep closeness between people are to be achieved' (2012c). In this sense, silence brings listening, knowledge, understanding, deepening, balance, gestures, bodily expression, and questions about the meaning of life. For this reason, Benedict XVI affirms that 'it is necessary to develop an appropriate environment, a kind of 'eco-system' that maintains a just equilibrium between silence, words, images and sounds' (2012c).

Benedict XVI relies on the three steps proposed by John Paul II for the media to have a positive impact on society: formation, participation, and dialogue (John Paul II 2005, no. 11). Firstly, formation in the sense that the responsible and critical use of the media helps people to use them 'intelligently and appropriately'. Furthermore, neither should the use of audio-visual language be exaggerated, nor the temptation to manipulate it, but rather the desire to 'form and serve' society as a whole. Secondly, participation is a core value that 'arises from their nature as a good destined for all people'. In order to achieve this exercise of co-responsibility, legislative frameworks must be put in place to ensure the proper use of 'public resources and the performance of roles of public trust'. Finally, fostering dialogue would help the exchange of knowledge, and promoting solidarity and peace 'for building the civilization of love for which all peoples yearn' (Benedict XVI 2006, no. 4). In a contemporary era of close relations between communication and power (Castells 2009), Benedict XVI believes that formation, participation, and dialogue will facilitate the development of the media as a network of communication, communion and cooperation. Within this framework in which the service of information can develop, Benedict XVI keeps the poorest in mind. For that reason, beyond their technical contribution, the new media must take into account those who already suffer from economic and social marginalisation, avoiding contributing to widening the gap between the poor and the new media (Benedict XVI 2009c).

4.4. The media: a challenge for education

Young people born in this millennium have naturally lived with Information and communications technology since their childhood, although not all of them because of social inequality (Facer and Furlong 2001). Among the many advantages of new technologies, there is a deep concern about its misuse, such as the overuse, dependency, access to inappropriate content, cases of cyberbullying, grooming, sexting, and excessive costs

(Alfaro González et al. 2015). In addition to this, it should be noted that the use of mobile phones, video games, social networks and online gambling is becoming increasingly addictive (Chóliz Montañés and Marcos Moliner 2020). Hence, family, school, media and all social actors constitute a key role in digital education (Milenkova et al. 2018). Benedict XVI explores the intersection of media and education, which is the issue addressed in this part of the study.

There is evidence that the use of media in learning enhances critical thinking, political activism, and personal and social development (Hobbs 2004). Beyond this fact and in continuity with his predecessor's Apostolic Letter to those responsible for the media sector (John Paul II 2005, no. 3), Benedict XVI states that 'the media profoundly shape the cultural environment' (Benedict XVI 2007c, no.1). According to the thought of the Pontiff, the Catholic Church and even homes, parishes and school curricula should be at the forefront of media education, even though some people claim that the formative influence of the media is opposed to education in schools (2007c, no. 4). Hence the Pope proposes a twofold perspective in dealing with the media and the education of children: 'the formation of children by the media; and the formation of children to respond appropriately to the media.' On the one hand, there is the responsibility of the media as an industry, and on the other the training of users for active and critical participation (2007c, no. 2).

Nowadays, families have to make decisions that regulate the use of media in their homes, but media use also defines contemporary family life (Hoover et al. 2004). For this reason, Benedict XVI considers the role of families to be extremely important and warns that some trends in the media impose models of what family and society should be like (Benedict XVI 2008, no. 2). In this sense, the family have the right and the duty to educate their children's conscience so that they are able to choose how to use the media and to express judgements about it. Children should be introduced to a sense of aesthetics, moral values, classics of children's literature, fine arts and uplifting music. In contrast, 'the temptation to sensationalize should not be passively accepted in places of learning.' Therefore, media education requires formation in the exercise of freedom, not based on the insatiable search for novelty, but on that which is 'good, true and beautiful' (Benedict XVI 2007c, no. 2).

This commitment to ethical education in the media should not only be made by families and educators. Information ethics should also be embraced by society as a whole, especially by those working in the information industry, even though in some cases the media sector is influenced by the different models of communication that establish its role in society (Hallin and Mancini 2003). Despite the pressures that may arise from commercial competition, alluding to the attitude that Jesus of Nazareth had towards minors (Mk 10:16; Lk 17:2), Benedict XVI exhorts those responsible for the media to reject programmes that promote violence or trivialise sexuality, in such a way as 'to safeguard the common good, to uphold the truth, to protect individual human dignity and promote respect for the needs of the family' (2007c, no. 3).

4.5. The Internet: A network for a new communication

In a cybercultural context (Lévy 2001) digital journalism represents a new ecosystem for the media as it seeks to adapt the industry to this new scenario of information and

business model (Thorburn and Jenkins 2003). This new journalism has opened the possibility of giving its audience a multimedia approach with the combination of text, audio and video, and a greater interactivity with participation (Manovich 2001) This part of the study aims to bring to light the significance of the Internet contribution to society according to Benedict XVI.

The academic field of Christian digital communication approaches digital theology as answering fundamental questions such as who is my neighbour in the digital culture (Campbell and Garner 2016). In this respect, the German Pontiff is particularly interested in the profound transformations in communication patterns and human relationships, especially those of young people who have grown up with the new communication techniques of the digital world. He wishes to share some thoughts on the extraordinary potential of this technology when it is used to further human understanding and solidarity: 'These technologies are truly a gift to humanity and we must endeavour to ensure that the benefits they offer are put at the service of all human individuals and communities, especially those who are most disadvantaged and vulnerable' (Benedict XVI 2009c).

Numerical representation, modularity, automation, variability and transcoding are characteristics of new media that pave the way towards interactivity for the users (Manovich 2001, 27–61). Benedict XVI is aware that the new information technologies are 'giving birth to a new way of learning and thinking, with unprecedented opportunities for establishing relationships and building fellowship' (Benedict XVI 2011c). The Pope does not analyse the Internet phenomenon in the same terms as Lev Manovich's, but he underlines the main elements of the Internet phenomenon, characterised by easy access to information, the connection between people, and the possibilities for participation in society. In addition, the Pope stresses the numerous benefits of digital age: 'families are able to maintain contact across great distances; students and researchers have more immediate and easier access to documents, sources and scientific discoveries, hence they can work collaboratively from different locations; moreover, the interactive nature of many of the new media facilitates more dynamic forms of learning and communication, thereby contributing to social progress' (Benedict XVI 2009c). That is why, as underlined above, the new communication technologies must be placed at the service of the integral good of the individual and humanity (Benedict XVI 2011c).

Digital society can be conceptualized not only through its contents, but also through the relationships of content exchange (Spadaro 2014, 48). Anthropologically, Benedict XVI roots digital communication in the desire of all human beings to be in relationship with one another: 'This desire for communication and friendship is rooted in our very nature as human beings and cannot be adequately understood as a response to technical innovations' (Benedict XVI 2009c). This approach is the basis of online communities that share common interests (Van Dijk 1999). Theologically, for the Pope, the desire for online communication is explained in terms of the participation of the humankind 'in the communicative and unifying Love of God, who desires to make of all humanity one family'. The willingness to communicate is a response to God's call to people, imprinted in human nature as beings created in his image and likeness. The revelation of Jesus of Nazareth makes it clear that, in relationships between people, love is the central value that must prevail (Mk 12:30–31). Drawing on this Gospel teaching, Benedict XVI encourages those working in the world of digital

communication to commit themselves to promote 'a culture of *respect*, *dialogue* and *friendship*'(Benedict XVI 2009c):

> Both those involved in the media sector and its users should "strive to *respect* the dignity and worth of the human person", by avoiding sharing words and images which raise hatred and intolerance, degrade beauty, demean sexual intimacy, and exploit the weak.

> New information technologies pave the way for *dialogue* between people from different countries, cultures, and religions, which requires attentive listening, honest and correct ways of expression, and respect for the mutual search for truth.

> The concept of *friendship* has emerged in digital social networks to promote solidarity, human right, respect for life, good of creation peace and justice. However, it is important to ensure that the digital world in which these networks are created is truly accessible to all and that online friendship does not become obsessive and undermine physical relationships with others.

In the Post-Synodal Exhortation on the Word of God, the Pope calls for new methods for the transmission of the Gospel message. Among these new methods are the media and the new media, the so-called Internet (Benedict XVI 2010a, no. 113), which provides important opportunities and updates the Pauline exhortation: 'Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel' (1 Cor 9:16). While Benedict acknowledges the growing role of the Internet as a new forum for making the Gospel known, he points out that the virtual world can never replace the real world in creating meaningful relationship. Consequently, Benedict XVI believes that virtual reality aims after all at personal contact, which remains indispensable (2010a, no. 113).

4.6. Social media: a tool for sharing ideas

Web 2.0 has generated a culture of user participation and created a framework for information exchange, which is an essential feature of social media (Obar and Wildman 2015) Today, many types of social networks have proliferated (Kaplan 2012). Scholars have studied how social networks have created a revolutionary paradigm in the relationships between people that influences ideas, emotions, health, behaviour, politics, and culture (Christakis and Fowler 2009). Because of the impact that social media are having on all areas of society, research in this field of digital technology and its ethical implications for people's lives is increasingly necessary (Ess 2009). In the arena of Catholic thought, in Benedict XVI's Pontificate, the question arises as to the contribution of social media, and its potential risks.

Benedict XVI notes the great opportunities of social media, which have also been analysed by scholars, focusing mainly on knowledge and shared projects (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010). The Pope believes that social media has introduced a renewal in the act of communicating, as knowledge is shared in the context of personal exchanges, thus relativising the distinction between the producer and the consumer of information. According to him, these developments have contributed to a new appreciation of communication itself, with positive consequences: dialogue among people beyond the exchange of data; sharing between people; search for personal encounters with others; and promotion of solidarity (Benedict XVI 2011c).

In Benedict XVI's view, social networks also have their own limitations: the one-sidedness of the interaction; the tendency to communicate only some parts of one's interior world; the risk of constructing a false image of oneself or an artificial public profile; a sort of parallel existence; the excessive exposure to the virtual world; the manipulation of emotions; and the depersonalisation of people (Benedict XVI 2011c). Some of these issues could be further explored in the area of Christian communication ethics and enrich the themes studied in the field of digital ethics (Himma and Tavani 2008).

For the Pope, it is important to note the positive consequences resulting from the new technologies that allow people to meet each other beyond the frontiers of space and their own cultures. However, it is beneficial not to reduce all human contact to the virtual relationship. Consequently, the Pontiff asks questions that are aimed at preventing the human being from becoming involved in the potential risks of social media, such as 'who is my 'neighbour' in this new world?' (Benedict XVI 2011c).

Beyond the popularity of the content and its persuasive dissemination, social media need the engagement of citizens (Vedder 2009). According to the Pope, citizens should be committed to dialogue, reasoned debate and logical argumentation: 'Dialogue and debate can also flourish and grow when we converse with and take seriously people whose ideas are different from our own' (Benedict XVI 2013). Due to the fact that people share themselves, their vision of the world, their hopes, their ideals on the Internet, there is a Christian way of being present in the digital world, which is 'honest and open, responsible and respectful of others' (Benedict XVI 2011c).

4.7. The role of the media in the Church

In the face of the new phenomenon of online religious (Helland 2000) questions about how to approach faith with the logic of the web arise (Spadaro 2014), including what role theology will play in the coming years (Sánchez-Camacho 2020), as well as what should be the role of the Church in the process of evangelisation in an increasingly digital global context (Arboleda Mora 2017). According to Benedict XVI, these issues raise further questions about how the Church's evangelisation in the digital world should be implemented.

In continuity with an apostolic exhortation of John Paul II addressed to Africa (John Paul II 1995, no. 124), Benedict believes that the media are a significant instrument for the evangelisation and development of the African continent (Benedict XVI 2011a, no. 142). An evangelisation that is intimately connected to justice, peace, and respect for truth, which would help journalists to avoid the temptation to sensationalism, manipulation, and easy money.[5] Therefore, the Pope encourages the presence of competent lay people in the public or private communications sector to bring the teaching of Christ and the Church to the world in a positive and constructive way (Benedict XVI 2011a, no. 145). That is because 'the Church is called to exercise a 'diaconia of culture' on today's 'digital continent'' (Benedict XVI 2010b). Hence, from a pastoral theological perspective, the Pope explains relations with non-believers and believers of other religions in this way (2010b).

In this area of pastoral care, the Pope encourages Christians of all generations, and especially young people, to share the witness of their faith in the new 'agorà' which the current media are opening up' (2010b). As in the early days of the Church, the first Christians delivered the Gospel to the Greco-Roman world, having to understand the culture and customs of that context, it is now necessary to know the digital world in order to use it correctly: 'It falls, in particular, to young people, who have an almost spontaneous affinity for the new means of communication, to take on the responsibility for the evangelization of this 'digital continent'' (Benedict XVI 2009c).

Social media can help Church people to encounter God in the areas of liturgy, catechesis, and charity. Benedict XVI addresses a topic of discussion that is especially raised after his papacy in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Church's online activities (Sánchez-Camacho and Martínez 2021). According to Benedict XVI, the virtual meeting should be the starting point for the invitation to share faith in a face-to-face way in a Christian community (2013). Benedict XVI responds to the discussion on the real presence of the Eucharist in a virtual space. While the Pope acknowledges that the word participation has taken on a wide meaning in recent times and that the media open new possibilities for some kind of remote participation in the celebration of the Eucharist, he affirms that 'visual images can represent reality, but they do not actually reproduce it.' Therefore, while recognising that it is praiseworthy for the sick and elderly to participate via the media, the Pope does not dispense those who celebrate the Sunday Eucharist remotely from physically attending (Benedict XVI 2007b, no. 57).

On the celebration of the Year of the Priesthood, Benedict XVI reflects on the new possibilities offered to priests by the digital world: 'Yet the recent, explosive growth and greater social impact of these media make them all the more important for a fruitful priestly ministry' (2010b). This is why the Pope believes that the more the frontiers of the digital world expand, the more the priest will be called to be pastorally involved in this field, by putting the media ever more effectively 'at the service of the Word', and employing 'the latest generation of audiovisual resources (images, videos, animated features, blogs, websites) which, alongside traditional means, can open up broad new vistas for dialogue, evangelization and catechesis' (2010b).

For this task, in addition to a solid theological formation and an inner spiritual life, the priest must learn about the new media. This will not only encourage the priest's pastoral outreach but will 'give a soul' to the communications network that comprises the Web: 'In this way the Word can traverse the many crossroads created by the intersection of all the different highways that form cyberspace and show that God has his rightful place in every age, including our own' (Benedict XVI 2010b). In this regard, Spadaro calls not only for the use of the Internet in the Church, but also for thinking of Christianity according to the logic of the web (Spadaro 2014). In the Pope's view, communicating the Gospel through the new media means not only providing openly religious content giving reason for hope (1 Peter 3:15), but also giving coherent witness, 'in the way one communicates choices, preferences and judgements that are fully consistent with the Gospel, even when it is not spoken of specifically' (Benedict XVI 2011c).

In relation to social media and considering that Christian tradition throughout history has used symbols such as the cross, icons, images and paintings, Benedict XVI suggests the development of images and sounds for the communication of the Gospel in social

media (Benedict XVI 2013). Regarding the character limit for short messages on social networks, the Roman Pontiff believes that 'in concise phrases, often no longer than a verse from the Bible, profound thoughts can be communicated, as long as those taking part in the conversation do not neglect to cultivate their own inner lives' (2012c). Attitudes are also important in this digital environment, with the aim of giving oneself to others by being available to respond patiently and respectfully to questions and doubts on the path of the search for the meaning of human existence and discernment in each person: 'The growing dialogue in social networks about faith and belief confirms the importance and relevance of religion in public debate and in the life of society' (2013).

5. Conclusion

Through different documents during his Pontificate, Pope Benedict XVI has addressed the media and digital culture, exploring Information Ethics on the background of the theology of communication. In his reflection, the German Pope focuses on the implications of the media and the new digital technology for the human being, the environment, society, and the Catholic Church. What follows are more specific conclusions which this Pope considers in his official writings:

1. The progress of technology offers good possibilities for society, especially for improving the lives of human beings. For this reason, scientific discoveries are an opportunity for growth of the human person if they are used in the right way. However, it could represent a threat to mankind and the world if technical progress is not complemented by other improvements in the ethical area. To prevent a negative scenario, such as the technification of nature, it is possible to make technical development compatible with human development. For this reason, beyond an empiricist and sceptical view of life, development must be based on values, to make progress integral and true. Hence the need for bioethics, and the need for the spiritual dimension that is capable of surpassing the materialistic vision of human events.
2. Currently, there is a necessity to address information ethics in order to defend the person, to fully respect human dignity, and to present the truth to humanity. The media should be a voice for truth, avoiding both economic materialism and ethical relativism. Just as bioethics represents a bridge between technology and ethics, information ethics has the same function in the field of communication.
3. In relation to the role of the media in society, the communication industry needs to be at the service of truth and promoting the dignity of peoples, facilitating communication, communion, cooperation, formation, participation, dialogue, justice, fraternity, charity, literacy, socialisation, democracy, solidarity, social justice, and the common good. But in addition to being able to be used as vehicles for unity and peace, the media can also be employed for destruction, division, disinformation, deformation, and dehumanisation. It is also significant to combine silence, words, images, and sounds, as well as dialogue, which is a distinctive feature of the Internet era. Another important challenge is to overcome the gap between the poor and the media.

4. The challenges include both the formation of children by the media and the formation of children to respond appropriately to the media, as well as the responsibility of the media as an industry towards the training of all its users. In addition, the role of families is particularly important, because the parents are responsible for educating their children's consciences about how to use the media. Nevertheless, the commitment to ethical media teaching should be also conducted by educators, communicators, and all of society as a whole.

5. Digital technology, which is interactive in nature and is committed to access to information and knowledge, has an extraordinary potential to promote understanding and solidarity, and to serve the most vulnerable. Taking the theology of communication as a basis, those working in the world of digital communication should commit themselves to promoting a culture of respect, dialogue, and friendship.

6. Social media has introduced a new form of communication, as it has relativised the role of the producer and consumer of information, bringing in the sharing of information and the interactive encounter. However, social media also involve different risks that must be solved through physical meetings and answering the question of who my neighbour is.

7. Media and digital continent are a vehicle for evangelisation, witness and encounter between believers and non-believers alike. To this end, the Church needs to be trained in the use of digital technology, and social media can help people to encounter God through liturgy, catechesis, or charity. However, this can only be the beginning of a journey, since there are areas, such as the Eucharist, that require a physical encounter.

Benedict XVI's teachings on communication have consequences not only for the Church's communication and praxis on the Internet, but also for the understanding of faith in the digital world. They even offer to the field of communication ethics a Christian perspective on being present on the Internet based on the question 'who is my neighbour'. In addition, the Internet is undergoing profound changes that bring new opportunities and challenges, which need to be researched. Nowadays, Pope Francis has also developed the topic of digital communication and culture. Therefore, in order to know the Social Doctrine of the Church in a more up-to-date way on this topic, it is necessary to study the category of communication and digitalisation during the Pontificate of Pope Francis. The analysis of his encyclicals, exhortations and messages at World Communications Days could complete the line of research outlined in this study.

Notes

1. Augustine and Bonaventure have been the theological figures who have most influenced Joseph Ratzinger, so that his theological anthropology is distinguished by the idea of God's will and that all human progress is a gift of God and not a product of mere human abilities (Zolezzi 2018). Indeed, the similarities of this theological perspective with Protestant theology have even been explored (Corkery 2013).

2. For instance, in the case of Charles Curran, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith reported the incompatibility of some of his theses in moral theology with fidelity to the Magisterium of the Church (Ratzinger 1986).

3. Benedict explains that when the sole criterion of technique is predominant, 'for action in business is thought to be the maximization of profit, in politics the consolidation of power, and in science the findings of research' (Benedict XVI 2009b, no. 71).
4. Expressing this idea, Benedict XVI underlines the words of the Second Vatican Council in establishing the links between the media and charitable action. According to the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, due to the evolution of the means of communication, the distances between peoples have almost been eliminated, and charitable activity should cover all people and all needs (Second Vatican Council 1965c, no. 8).
5. This ecclesial document recognises that there has been progress in Catholic media in Africa, following the choice made by the First Special Assembly for Africa in 1994 to consider communication as one of the main areas of evangelisation. (Benedict XVI 2011a, no. 146).

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