

Weaponisation of the Social Media and Ethical Issues

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Introduction

In this reflection, we adopt the hypothesis that the use of Social media has become problematic in such a way that they have been turned into weapons of violence and destruction that not only endanger real communication in the society but also destroy human dignity.

Social Media here refers to the collective of online communications channels dedicated to community-based input, interaction, content-sharing and collaboration. For example, Facebook, Twiter, Google Plus, YouTube, Instagram, Telegram, etc.

“Social Media platforms (...) have dramatically different structure than previous media technologies (Radio, television). Content can be relayed among users with no significant third part filtering, fact-checking or editorial judgment.”¹ An individual user with no track record or reputation can in some cases reach as many readers as Fox News, BBC, CNN, the New York Times, etc. This has serious implications for communication in the contemporary society.

Our reflection will be done in three parts. Frist, we argue that while Social Media facilitate the circulation of independent information, connecting people and helping in the defense of the most vulnerable, they have also become weapons of destruction of people and institutions especially through the spread of fake news.

We further show that what is implied in the spread of fake news is the erosion of the sense of truth and the establishment of the reign of falsehood, leading to the loss of the sense of the sacredness of the human person.

We conclude by calling for the retrieval of the ethical question of Truth. If Social Media have to remain instruments of communication in the noble sense of the word-connecting and uniting peoples and cultures, there needs to be serious education on their ethical. This will include discernment of the truth and respect of the dignity of the human person.

¹ Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, “Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election”, *Journal of Economic Perspectives*- Vol 31, N° 2, Spring 2017: p 211-236) (p. 211).

Social Media as Weapon

We use the word weapon in its complex sense. First as something, such as a gun, knife, bomb, that is used for fighting or attacking someone or for defending oneself when attacked. Second, weapon could also mean something, such as a skill, idea, or tool, that is used to win a contest or achieve something. In that sense, a weapon is not necessarily negative, all depends on the purpose of its use.

Weapon of the Weak

In the final message of the Synod for the Youth held in October 2018, the Synod Fathers stated clearly that “the digital world is one of socio-political engagement and active citizenship and can facilitate the circulation of independent information that can provide effective protection for the most vulnerable, publicizing violations of their rights.”²

In fact, Social Media have changed political participation. Some researchers have shown that that “the Social Media have the potential to offset existing inequalities in the representation among interest groups and act as a “weapon of the weak” by providing a technological infrastructure that allows even groups with limited resources to create content and interact across the globe.”³

Positively, Social Media often play important role in advocacy.⁴ Groups are able to mobilize and voice their concerns if their interests are disturbed. Groups strive for attention of political decision-makers in open competition with each other. “The interactivity of social media allows interest groups to build communities and engage in direct conversations with their supporters in a personal and cost-efficient manner.”⁵

Social Media have become the Weapon of a New Generation that would normally not have any force in the political arena.⁶ A good example is that of Egypt. The Government of Hosni Mubarak shut down internet on 28 January 2011 when they

² Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment, <http://www.synod.va/content/synod2018/en/fede-discernimento-vocazione/final-document-of-the-synod-of-bishops-on-young-people--faith-an.html>, consulted on 17th October 2019, n° 22.

³ Amber Van der Graaf, Simon Otjes and Anne Rasmussen, „Weapon of the Weak? The Social Media Landscape of Interest Groups, *European Journal of Communication* 2016 Vol 31 (2) 120-135, p. 120.

⁴ Ibid., p.121.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Gabriella Scaramuzzino and Roberto Scaramuzzino, “The Weapon of a New Generation? – Swedish Civil Society Organizations’ Use Social Media to Influence Politics” *Journal of Information Technology and Politics* 2017 Vol 14, N° 1, p 46-61.

felt threatened. People were on the streets to demonstrate against corruption, police brutality and economic oppression. The eighteen days relentless protest fueled by Social Media put an end to thirty years of authoritarian rule in Egypt.⁷ “Social Media brought to the Egyptians a sense of self-empowerment through the capacity to speak and assemble that was previously not there.”⁸ Social Media had the same impact in Tunisia, Libya and Iran.

Weapon of Violence

There are different ways in which Social Media serve as weapon of violence. For example, a study done at the University of Hawaii, USA, shows how independent Violence Entrepreneurs use Social Media to raise funds to fight against enemies they determine themselves in order to satisfy their own ambitions or desires.⁹ However, we prefer to focus here on the phenomenon of Fake News.

Fake News refers to News that are intentionally and verifiably false and could mislead readers¹⁰. It is “the spreading of disinformation online or in the traditional media. It has to do with false information based on non-existent or distorted data meant to deceive and manipulate the reader. Spreading fake news can serve to advance specific goal, influence political decision and serve economic interest.”¹¹

In their study, cited above, “Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election”, Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, show how fake news strongly influenced the last presidential elections in USA. They suggest that Donald Trump would not have been elected president of the US were it not for the influence of Fake News.¹²

About three weeks ago, Social Media were filled with the rumors of a second wedding of President Muhamadu Buhari with Sadiyya Farouk, Minister of Humanitarian affairs. All the blogs claimed to hold their information about the wedding a source in the Presidency. They even posted a wedding invitation card which read, "The families of the late Alhaji Buhari Daura and that of late Alhaji

⁷ Amir Hatan Ali, “The Power of Social Media in Developing Nations: New Tools for Closing the Global Digital Divide and Beyond”, *Harvard Human Rights Journal*, 2011Vol 24, p. 185-219.

⁸Ibid., p. 187.

⁹ Nicole Sunday Grove, “Weapons of Mass Participation: Social Media, Violence Entrepreneurs and the Politics of Crowdfunding for War”, *European Journal of International Relations*, 2019, Vol 25 (1) 86-107.

¹⁰ Cf. Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, “Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election”, p 213.

¹¹ Pope Francis, Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the World Communications Day, 24 January 2018, “The Truth Will Set You Free” (Jn 8:32). Fake News and Journalism for Peace”, p. 2.

¹² Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, “Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election”.

Umar Farouk cordially invite...to the wedding ceremony of their children, Alhaji Muhammadu Buhari (GCFR) and Hajiya Sadiyya Umar Farouk scheduled to take place as follows: Date: Friday, October 11, 2019; time: 2.00 pm; venue: Central Mosque, FCT, Abuja, Nigeria." However, the wedding rumour turned false, the invitation card was never designed by either the Dauras or the Farouks or the presidency. Even though no such wedding held, it created a lot of buzz on social media, especially on Twitter.

Such stories spread so quickly that even authoritative denials fail to contain the damage. If anybody from the presidency published a disclaimer, people would say that they fact that they hurriedly reacted shows that there is something finishing. If the presidency kept quiet, people would say that the fact that they kept quiet shows that there is an element of truth.

Pope Francis judged the issue of Fake news so serious that he dedicated his message for the 2018 World Communication's day to the issue: **The Truth Will Set You Free" (Jn 8:32). Fake News and Journalism for Peace."**

What makes Fake news dangerous is that it mimics real news. It is captious "inasmuch as it grasps people's attention by appealing to stereotypes and common social prejudices and exploiting instantaneous emotions like anxiety, contempt, anger and frustrations."¹³ The tragedy is that this disinformation "discredits others, presenting them as enemies to the point of demonizing them and fomenting conflict."

What are the implications of Fake news for communication. We single out two among others: *the erosion of the sense of Truth; Loss of the sense of the sacredness of the human person.*

Implications of the Weaponisation of Social Media

Erosion of the Sense of Truth

The proliferation of fake news is the expression of a culture that has lost its sense of truth and bends the facts to suit particular interests.¹⁴ People already speak of a "Post-Truth Society." *Oxford Dictionary* of 2016 defines 'post-truth' as an adjective 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief. "

The concept of truth is displaced. The most ancient philosophical concept of truth as *adaequatio intellectus et rei* (Truth is the correspondence of object and intellect) is replaced with the question of values which have become relative. "What interests

¹³ Ibid. p. 2.

¹⁴ Synod for the Youth 2018, no 24.

contemporary society is not what is true but rather what works, what is effective, what is valuable."¹⁵

This is in connection with the dictatorship of relativism vehemently denounced by Pope Benedict XVI. Already at the beginning of the conclave in 2005, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (later Benedict XVI) declared: "We are building a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate standard consists solely of one's own ego and desires."¹⁶ Relativism is at the heart of what is called the new global culture¹⁷ that abandons civilisations in the hands of personal desires and ambitions.

The first fake news in the history of humanity was created by the crafty serpent in Genesis 3:1-5.

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?"

The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'"

"You will not certainly die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

The story shows how the serpent distorted the truth and deceived the woman, Eve. The Serpent approached the woman pretending to be concerned about her welfare. But in the serpent's strategy we see the deceptive power of evil that moves from one lie to another in order to rob the human being of their interior freedom. On the other hand, the serpent appealed to the greed of the human being and the thirst for power. "God knows that on the day you eat of this fruit, your eyes will open and you will be like gods, knowing good and evil"(Genesis 3, 5).

Fake News created by the Serpent led to the fall of man and grave consequences, particularly, the first fratricide – the story of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4, 1-16) and countless evils committed against fellow human beings and God. Fake News also

¹⁵ Eberhard Jüngel, "Value-Free Truth: The Christian Experience of Truth in the Struggle against the Tyranny of Values", *Theological Essays II*, (Edited by J. B. Webster), T & T Clark, Edinburgh. 1995, p.191-215.

¹⁶ See also Benedict XVI, *Light of the World*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2010, p.50-53.

¹⁷ Marguerite Peeters, *The Globalization of the Western Cultural Revolution*, Institute of Intercultural Dialogue Dynamics, 2007.

led to the chaos and confusion of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11, 1-9). When truth is distorted, communication becomes impossible.

Loss of the sense of the sacredness of the human person

Fake News is a consequence of the loss of the sense of the sacredness of the human person and it destroys humanity. In *The Brothers Karamazo*, Dostoevsky, stated :

People who lie to themselves and listen to their own lie, come to such a pass that they cannot distinguish the truth with them or around them and so lose respect for themselves and for others. And having no respect they cease to love and in order to occupy and distract themselves without love they give way to passions and to coarse pleasures and sink to bestiality in their vices, all from continual lying to others and to themselves.¹⁸

The person who creates and disseminates fake news has come to the level of lack of sense of the sacredness of the human person and of our common humanity.

In African traditions, the human person is understood as a network of relationships. The best word to define this network is "relatedness."¹⁹ This is embodied in the Igbo proverb, "Ife kwulu, ife akwudebe ya"(something stands and something else stands beside it).²⁰ Eastern and Southern Africans call it *ubuntu*. Our existence is bound together. "My humanity is inextricably bound up in yours."²¹ They say, "*Umuntu ungununtu ngabantu.*" That is, "A person is a person because of others." This means that to exist is to be related in a multiplicity of ways. On the other hand, what is not related does not exist. Hence, the human person is sacred because the human person as such is a network of relationship between the visible world and the invisible world. The sacred is approached with reverence and deep respect. Profanation of the sacred is considered as abomination.

The African understanding of human person is very close to the Christian understanding of the *person*. The concept of *person* is a unique contribution of Christian theology to anthropological epistemology.²² The concept of *person* emerged

¹⁸ Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, II, 2.

¹⁹ Cf. Elochukwu Uzukwu, *A Listening Church: Autonomy and Communion in African Churches*, Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1996, pp. 35-38; John Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy*, London, Heinemann, 1969, p.224.

²⁰ Cf. Elochukwu Uzukwu, *God, Spirit, and Wholeness*, Oregon, PICKWICK Publications, 2012 Chapter 2, p.5-39.

²¹ Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, New York, Doubleday, 2000, p. 31.

²² Cf. Gil Bailie, The subject of *Gaudium et Spes*, Reclaiming a Christocentric Anthropology of the Human

in the context of the definition of the Trinitarian relations, that there are three persons in God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It was Tertullian, the African who employed the word *persona* to designate the three divine relations. *Persona, prosôpon*, signified “the being in and for themselves of the Father, Son and the Spirit respectively.”²³

The Greek fathers preferred the word *hypostasis* to define personhood.²⁴ This implies that “the ontological question of ‘what something is’ is not answered by pointing to the ‘self-existent’, to a being as it is determined by its own boundaries but to a being which in its exstasis breaks through these boundaries in a movement of communion.”²⁵

This understanding of the human person comes very close to the Heideggerian understanding of being, *Dasein*: being-with, being-from, being-for. Being is characterized by openness to the other. It is said that one *ek-sists*, that is receives oneself from the other. Thus a person is not just an individual but an open and ecstatic reality, referred to others for his/her existence. “The actualization of the person takes place in self-transcendence, the movement of freedom toward communion with other persons.”²⁶

Consequently, in the practice of Fake News, the human person, being as communion, is distorted. Hence humanity is destroyed. Both the perpetrator and the victim are destroyed. We tend to think that there is only one victim. In reality, all are victims. In his book, *No future without forgiveness*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu notes that “In the process of dehumanizing another, in inflicting untold harm and suffering, inexorably the perpetrator is being dehumanized as well.”²⁷

How can the society respond to the weaponisation of social media that destroy the human person and humanity in general ?

Person, <https://www.stthomas.edu/media/catholicstudies/center/ryan/conferences/2005,vatican/Bailie.pdf>, consulted on 19 March 2017.

²³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1.1, Chapter 2, part 1.8. See also Eberhard Jüngel, *The Doctrine of the Trinity. God's Being is in Becoming*, Grand Rapids Michigan, William Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1976, p 17.

²⁴ Cf. Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us. The Trinity and Christian Life*, New York, HarperSanFrancisco, 1991; John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, Crestwood, New York, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985, p. 15.

²⁵ Catherine LaCugna, *God for us*, p. 260.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Desmond Tutu, *No Future without forgiveness*, p. 103.

Bring Back the Ethical Question

Naturally the first thing that comes to mind is to ask governments to re-inforce institutions and legal structures aimed at developing regulations for curbing the phenomenon of misinformation and Fake News.

However, we know quite well that these laws depend on who has the economic and media power to promote and impose. They are subject to the caprices of the majority that has the power. Moreover, some world powers and powerful Media prefer to break the law and pay. They know that their financial gains are far more than the penalty they pay. The same applies to the question of environmental crisis and climate change. Some world powers and big industries prefer to pay penalties and continue polluting the earth, our common home. They throw in their whole weight to make sure that the penalties are reduced to the strict minimum.

We propose to begin from the fundamental question that is always neglected, namely, the moral question of the truth of human life and the meaning of human action: What must I do? What must we do? How do I distinguish good from evil?

In his Encyclical, *Veritatis Splendor*, Pope John Paul II responded elaborately to this fundamental moral question. He stated clearly that this question must be put in connection with the question of teleology, that has been eclipsed in the modern society. What is the goal and end of human life? This is portrayed in the dialogue between the young rich man and Jesus in Matthew 19, 16-22. The Young man asks Jesus, "What must I do to possess eternal life? Jesus answers him, "If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments" (Mtt 19:17). What are the commandments?, "You must not kill. You must not commit adultery. You must not steal. You must not bring false witness. Honour your father and mother and you must love your neighbour as yourself". It means that the commandments "are the first necessary step on the journey towards freedom"²⁸, on the journey to life.

This is a total critique of what is called today absolute freedom, which exalts freedom "to such extent that it becomes an absolute, which would then be the source of values." The idea of absolute freedom accords the individual conscience the status of supreme tribunal of moral judgment determining the criteria of good and evil. In this sense, truth as such disappears and becomes relative.

However, the Bible teaches that "the power to decide what is good and what is evil does not belong to man, but to God"(VS 35). Man is free in as much as he can understand and accept God's command.. "In fact, human freedom finds its authentic and complete fulfilment precisely in the acceptance of that law"(VS 35). Freedom derives from obedience to the truth ordained by God Freedom requires the capacity of self-dispossession, discipline. Freedom presupposes self-control and lucidity

²⁸ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, The Splendor of the Truth, Rome, 6 August 1993, p.13.

about one's limitations and qualities. Here shines out the meaning of Jesus' expression "You will know the Truth and the Truth will make you free" (John 8,32).

It is therefore urgent to re-inforce Education for the truth. This means "teaching people how to discern, evaluate and understand our deepest desires and inclinations lest we lose sight of what is good and yield to every temptation (Pope Francis Message 2018: 3).

Religious, Social institutions and schools should create educational programmes aimed at helping people to interpret and assess information produced in the media. Teaching them how to unmask falsehood and refrain from contributing to the spread of disinformation.

If contemporary men and woman understand this fundamental issue, then communication will be at the service of authentic culture of encounter. As Pope Francis says in his Message for World communication day 2014, We really communicate, when communication makes us neighbours to one another. Communication is really about realizing that we are all human beings, children of God. Communication is neighbourliness.