



Social communication in the digital age: An ethical reflection based on *Communio et Progressio*¹

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ABSTRACT

Digital communication technologies have profoundly transformed contemporary society, reshaping interpersonal relationships, cultural identity, and social structures. From early computing to the Internet, social media, and artificial intelligence, digital media have expanded opportunities for global connectivity, participation, and access to information. However, these developments also generate serious ethical challenges, including misinformation, surveillance, polarization, and the weakening of authentic human communion. This paper offers an ethical evaluation of digital communication in light of the Catholic Church's pastoral instruction *Communio et Progressio* (1971). Grounded in a Trinitarian theology of self-giving love, the document understands communication as fundamentally oriented toward communion—the building of unity, truth, and the common good. By emphasizing shared freedom, moral responsibility, and the necessity of media education, *Communio et Progressio* provides an enduring framework for guiding ethical engagement within today's digital culture. The study argues that digital communication can serve human flourishing only when rooted in truth, respect for human dignity, and solidarity. Ultimately, digital media participate—however imperfectly—in God's own self-communication and must therefore be shaped toward authentic communion rather than fragmentation.

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Introduction

At the dawn of the 21st century, the rapid advancement of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has fundamentally reshaped the fabric of human society. Often described as the “Information Revolution,” this transformation extends far beyond technical innovation—it represents a profound cultural and existential shift in how human beings understand themselves, their relationships, and their participation in the world¹. This view has been extensively articulated by prominent scholars, including Joshua Meyrowitz, Stig Hjarvard, and Manuel Castells.

¹Anthony, I. Kanu, A. Bonaventure Chike, and O. Peter Ejikeme, “Information Revolution and the Future of Humanity: A Critical Perspective,” *Estaga Journal of Philosophy, Arts and Humanities (EJOPAH)* 1, no. 1 (2024).

Meyrowitz, for instance, describes media as conduits, languages, and environments, emphasizing that digital technologies now function as living contexts that shape perception, identity, and interaction². Hjarvard extends this insight by arguing that media have become central agents of cultural globalization, restructuring the networks through which meaning is produced and exchanged³. Castells, meanwhile, situates communication technologies within the broader dynamics of the “network society,” in which social structures and individual identities are increasingly constituted by global flows of information. At this stage, it may be argued that technologies should not be understood solely as external tools, but as integral dimensions of human existence, functioning as spaces where culture, identity, and meaning are continually produced and contested⁴.

However, while acknowledging its considerable profits, this man-made device also poses ethical and relational challenges⁵. Sherry Turkle warns that digital connection may substitute for genuine intimacy, blurring the boundaries between solitude and relationship⁶. It enables a larger participation and promotes innovation, yet also exacerbates inequality, misinformation, and surveillance. Employing the metaphors of “blessings” and “curses,” Udo Fidelis Patrick argues that although digital technology offers significant advantages, it also entails serious drawbacks. He states that the digital environment poses several critical challenges, including information pollution, the proliferation of fake news, the indiscriminate dissemination of content, and an increasing erosion of shared standards and norms governing digital communication.⁷

Amid the expanding use of communication technologies, such guidelines are indispensable for ensuring their responsible and ethical application. Consequently, technological development requires not only technical competence but also moral discernment and a human-centered understanding of responsibility⁸. Without such an ethical framework, these technologies risk intensifying social divisions, facilitating the spread of misinformation, and heightening the tension between the exercise of expressive freedom and the demands of responsible digital engagement⁹.

In this regard, the Catholic Church has made sustained ethical contributions to the responsible use of modern means of communication. From *Vigilanti Cura* (1936) through *Inter Mirifica* (1963) of the Second Vatican Council and its pastoral development in *Communio et Progressio* (1971), the Church has progressively articulated a moral framework that addresses both the opportunities and risks inherent in communication technologies. While affirming their capacity to foster education, participation, and evangelization, these documents also acknowledge the dangers of distraction, manipulation, and the fragmentation of authentic human relationships.

Given the topic's importance, however, there have been few writings that discuss its theological and ethical dimensions in communication. Drawing primarily on *Communio et Progressio*, this paper examines communication not merely as a technical or social activity but as participation in God's self-communication, ordered toward communion, truth, and the advancement of humanity. Within this theological perspective, ethical communication becomes integral to the Church's mission of unity and service to the common good¹⁰.

² Joshua Meyrowitz, “Media and Community,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 6, no. 3 (1989): 326–334.

³ Stig Hjarvard, “The Mediatization of Religion: A Theory of the Media as Agents of Religious Change,” *Northern Lights* 6 (2008): 9–26, <https://doi.org/10.1386/nl.6.1.9/1>

⁴ Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 2nd ed., (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 28–32.

⁵ A. Meythaler, A. Baumann, H. Krasnova, O. Hinz, and S. Spiekermann, “Technology for Humanity,” *Business & Information Systems Engineering* 65, no. 5 (2021): 487–496.

⁶ Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 1–19.

⁷ Udo, Fidelis Patrick, “The Media Culture and the Democratization of Information: The Role of the Church in Fostering Media Education,” *EJ* 14 (2023): 169–193, esp. 170–171.

⁸ Y. Zelenkov and E. Lashkevich, “Does Information and Communication Technology Really Affect Human Development? An Empirical Analysis,” *Information Technology for Development* (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1080/02681102.2022.2081116>

⁹ J. Yamamoto and S. Ananou, “Humanity in the Digital Age: Cognitive, Social, Emotional, and Ethical Implications,” *Contemporary Educational Technology* 6, no. 1 (2015): 1–18.

¹⁰ Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *Communio et Progressio* (Pastoral Instruction on the Means of Social Communication), May 23, 1971.

Research question

What are the ethical implications of digital communication on social relationships, as reflected through the lens of *Communio et Progressio*?"

Research methodology

The study examines Social Communication in the Digital Age: An Ethical Reflection Based on *Communio et Progressio*. Consistent with the topic, the study employs document and textual analyses. Document analysis refers to the review by the researcher of written materials. These can include personal and non-personal documents such as archives, annual reports, guidelines, policy documents, diaries, or letters (Russel & Gregory, 2003). Textual analysis involves close, critical reading to interpret how content, language, and structure convey social, cultural, and thematic messages (Hawkins, 2023). The literature was searched using the keywords in Google Scholar. Literature selection involves an inclusion-exclusion strategy based on text quality. Originally, many references on social communication, social media, and ethics were selected, but only those directly relevant to the current topic were retained.

Results

1. Digital communication technology: Its promises and perils

Digital communication is generally understood as a process of creating, transmitting, and sharing information through digital technologies that encode data in binary form (0s and 1s). It integrates the human act of expressing and exchanging meanings with the technical processes of encoding, storing, and transmitting information via digital media and networks¹¹. Digital communication, therefore, integrates human and technological processes. It is dynamic, interactive, and continuous—enabled by computers, smartphones, and digital platforms across diverse social and cultural contexts. Examples include emails, digital audio and video recordings, e-books, blogs, instant messaging, and, more recently, social media¹².

Historically, digital communication has evolved through several major phases: the computer-based era, the emergence of the global Internet and social media, and, most recently, the contemporary era of artificial intelligence. Each stage has introduced significant innovations that have enhanced efficiency, connectivity, and access to information, thereby transforming human interaction and social organization. At the same time, these developments have posed challenges, including digital inequality, information overload, misinformation, and ethical concerns about data use, autonomy, and human agency. Thus, the historical progression of digital communication reveals a persistent tension between technological advancement and its social and moral implications for humanity.

1.1. The birth of the digital era: Computer (1940s–1960s)

Communication scholars widely identify the advent of the digital computer as marking the emergence of the digital era. A computer is a programmable device that performs sequences of arithmetic or logical operations automatically. The idea of such machines dates back to the early seventeenth century, when efforts to solve mathematical problems inspired early innovations. Mathematicians such as Wilhelm Schickard, Blaise Pascal, and Gottfried Leibniz developed mechanical calculators capable of performing basic arithmetic functions¹³. In the nineteenth century, Charles Babbage advanced these ideas with his designs for the Difference Engine (1823) and the Analytical Engine (1842). Although never completed, these machines laid the groundwork for modern computing. Working alongside Ada Lovelace, Babbage also articulated essential programming concepts, including loops, conditional branching, and variables¹⁴.

¹¹ Alberto Acerbi, "A Cultural Evolution Approach to Digital Media," *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 10 (2016): 636, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2016.00636>

¹² Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), 61–83.

¹³ Herman H. Goldstine, *A Brief History of the Computer*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), 311–314.

¹⁴ Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Computer>

Scholars generally describe the evolution of electronic computers in terms of successive generations shaped by key technological advances. Early programmable machines such as ENIAC, followed by EDVAC and UNIVAC, introduced the stored-program concept and replaced mechanical relays with vacuum tubes. Later developments led to increasingly sophisticated architectures, including parallel and distributed computing systems exemplified by the Sequant Balance 8000 and Intel's iPSC-1, alongside the widespread adoption of networking technologies such as LANs and WANs. In its current phase, computer technology emphasizes refinement rather than radical change, with improvements in processing speed, parallel architectures, and networking producing powerful personal computers and embedded microcontrollers. These compact computing systems now play a crucial role in consumer and industrial applications by enabling automation and control, while the resulting gains in computational efficiency have supported not only advanced data processing but also the digitization of communication itself¹⁵.

Examining the impact of computers on human communication, Joseph Weizenbaum¹⁶ and Ray Kurzweil¹⁷ point to their role as a new form of electronic writing system. They explain that, thanks to their advanced portability, computers have significantly changed how knowledge is shared and preserved. Through their capacity to store vast amounts of data over long periods and provide rapid, portable access to information, computers have reshaped how individuals think, learn, and interact. They have also contributed to the democratization of knowledge and the reconfiguration of power relations over information control. As John S. Quarterman¹⁸ observes, computer-mediated communication has altered human experiences of space and time by diminishing the importance of physical distance and prioritizing speed, efficiency, and continuous connectivity. At both individual and societal levels, these developments have significantly influenced education, public discourse, political participation, and cultural exchange.

At the organizational level, David W. Haines¹⁹ notes that rapid advances in computer technology are widely associated with increased efficiency and effectiveness in both office and manufacturing environments. Computerization is seen as a means to reduce costs, enhance operational flexibility, and improve coordination. A clear illustration is the shift from physical to digital file management systems. Whereas traditional file storage required substantial time and space, computer-based systems enable faster, more reliable access to information. Employees benefit from improved information flow and coordination, while file management staff experience fewer disruptions due to lost or misplaced documents, supported by audit trails and technologies such as barcoding that streamline workflows and reduce repetitive tasks.

Safana Alzide²⁰ further highlights the strategic importance of cloud computing as a core element of contemporary information technology strategies. Cloud computing enables on-demand access to shared computing resources—including networks, servers, storage, applications, and services—thereby supporting scalability, accessibility, and efficiency across organizational operations. However, increased computerization has also reshaped organizational hierarchies and work practices. Authority, accountability, and task management have become more data-driven, making previously informal activities measurable and visible. While this transparency can strengthen managerial control and operational oversight, it may also reduce employee autonomy and raise concerns regarding privacy, trust, and workplace surveillance.

Despite these transformative benefits, computer-based communication also presents serious challenges. The erosion of privacy, the expansion of data surveillance, and increasing digital dependency raise ethical and psychological concerns. Moreover, excessive reliance on mediated interaction can weaken interpersonal relationships, facilitate the spread of misinformation, and intensify social polarization. Persistent inequalities in

¹⁵ Herman H. Goldstine, *A Brief History of the Computer*, Ibid.

¹⁶ Joseph Weizenbaum, "Computers, Tools, and Human Reason," in *Communication in History: Technology, Culture*, Ibid. 354-358.

¹⁷ Ray Kurzweil, "Promise and Peril," *Interactive Week*, October 23, 2000, reprinted on KurzweilAI.net, © 2001 Ziff Davis Media Inc.

¹⁸ John S. Quarterman, "Telecomputing in the New Global Network", in *Communication in History: Technology, Culture*, 343-344.

¹⁹ David W. Haines, "Letting 'The System' Do the Work: The Promise and Perils of Computerization," *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 35, no. 3 (September 1999): 306-324

²⁰ Safana Alzide, "Cloud Computing: Evolution, Challenges, and Future Prospects," *Journal of Information Technology, Cybersecurity, and Artificial Intelligence* 1, no. 1 (2024): 52-63, <https://doi.org/10.70715/jitcai.2024.v1.i1.007>

access to digital technologies further deepen the digital divide, reinforcing existing social and economic disparities. Taken together, these dynamics demonstrate that while computer-based communication greatly expands human capabilities, it simultaneously introduces new ethical, social, and psychological vulnerabilities that demand critical reflection and responsible governance²¹.

Furthermore, at the organizational level, data security and privacy remain critical issues, as sensitive information stored in shared environments is vulnerable to breaches. Compliance with regulatory frameworks such as the GDPR and HIPAA further complicates implementation. Organizations also face risks of vendor lock-in, which can limit flexibility and hinder system migration, as well as performance constraints, particularly for applications requiring low latency. Consequently, while computer-based systems offer significant organizational benefits, their effective use requires careful balancing of efficiency, control, and human-centered values²².

1.2. The internet and global connectivity (1960s-1990s)

Historically, the origins of the Internet can be traced to the U.S. Department of Defense's Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA), which in 1969 launched ARPANET to connect computers at four research institutions: UCLA, Stanford, the University of California, Santa Barbara, and the University of Utah. Enabled by advances in the miniaturization of computing devices and the standardization of programming languages, ARPANET became the first backbone of digital communication. Initially, it served a small community of technically skilled users in military and academic settings²³.

As computer use expanded, institutions developed local area networks (LANs) that were linked through routers and later merged into wide area networks (WANs), forming an interconnected network. The adoption of the TCP/IP protocol in the early 1980s standardized communication across platforms, particularly through its integration into UNIX systems such as Berkeley Software Distribution (BSD). This development significantly accelerated Internet growth in academic and research institutions. By the mid-1980s, the National Science Foundation established NSFNET as a civilian and educational backbone, which operated until 1995 and laid the foundation for the modern global Internet²⁴.

Since then, the Internet has evolved from a specialized research network into a core global infrastructure supporting communication, education, commerce, and social interaction. Advances in cloud computing, artificial intelligence, the Internet of Things, and high-speed mobile networks have transformed it into a data-driven ecosystem. With more than five billion users worldwide, the Internet continues to reshape human connectivity, innovation, and everyday life in an increasingly digital society²⁵.

As the Internet matured from a research network into a public infrastructure, its social, psychological, and cultural impacts became increasingly evident. According to Jack Linchuan Qiu, this is largely because the Internet allows information to travel quickly across great distances. Building on earlier forms of electronic communication, the Internet not only turns analog content into digital form but also works as a vast "web of webs" that connects networks worldwide²⁶.

²¹ Joseph Weizenbaum, "Computers, Tools, and Human Reason, *Ibid*."

²² David W. Haines, *Ibid*.

²³ Jerry Glowinski, "History, Structure, and Function of the Internet," *Seminars in Nuclear Medicine* 28, no. 2 (April 1998): 135–144.

²⁴ Martin Campbell-Kelly and Daniel D. Garcia-Swartz, "The History of the Internet: The Missing Narratives," *Journal of Information Technology* 28 (2013): 18–33. <https://doi.org/10.1057/jit.2013.4> International Telecommunication Union (ITU), via World Bank, World Development Indicators (2025); HYDE, Historical Database of the Global Environment (2023); Gapminder (2022); United Nations, World Population Prospects (WPP, 2024), accessed October 28, 2025.

²⁵ International Telecommunication Union (ITU), via World Bank, World Development Indicators (2025); HYDE, Historical Database of the Global Environment (2023); Gapminder (2022); United Nations, World Population Prospects (WPP, 2024), accessed October 28, 2025.

²⁶ Jack Linchuan Qiu, "The Global Internet," in *Media and Society*, 6th ed., ed. James Curran and David Hesmondhalgh (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 1992), 02-6.

Today, most forms of media—such as print, broadcast, local and national news, and even automated systems—are now part of a growing digital network. This network connects people and communities across the world. As a result, the ways people interact and communicate continue to change. It also shapes how they think, receive information, and understand the news²⁷.

Scholarly research shows that as the Internet has expanded alongside increasingly powerful and affordable portable technologies—such as laptops, smartphones, and mobile communication devices—it has significantly strengthened global interconnectedness. Manuel Castells observes that digital technologies have democratized communication by enabling individuals worldwide to access information, create content, and collaborate across geographical boundaries²⁸. The growth of the World Wide Web, together with innovations such as Internet telephony and Internet television, has intensified global integration, effectively realizing what Marshall McLuhan described as a “global village²⁹.”

Within this interconnected environment, Denis McQuail explains that media influence operates through interrelated psychological and social processes, particularly identification and internalization. Identification occurs when individuals perceive media sources or figures as credible or attractive and adopt their attitudes, values, or behaviors, a dynamic evident in the influence of online communities and digital personalities. Internalization represents a deeper process in which media messages are absorbed because they align with personal beliefs or moral frameworks. In the digital age—characterized by continuous connectivity, algorithmic personalization, and interactive participation—these processes are amplified, shaping perceptions, emotions, and social relationships³⁰.

McQuail further draws on De Fleur’s models of media effects to illustrate how communication influences operate within society. The conditioning model views media effects as direct and stimulus-based, while individual differences and social categories theories emphasize that responses vary according to personality traits and social positions. The social relationships theory highlights the mediating role of interpersonal networks, whereas the cultural norms theory underscores the media’s capacity to shape shared values and perceptions of reality. Through these mechanisms, media gradually shape consciousness, self-image, and social norms while fostering learning, reflection, and empathy³¹.

Furthermore, the Internet has also generated profound organizational transformations across economic, governmental, educational, and healthcare sectors, not only by enhancing efficiency but also by reshaping institutional cultures and meaning-making processes. In the business domain, digital platforms enable global market expansion, real-time communication, and data-driven decision-making, while fostering new organizational identities aligned with branding, visibility, and consumer participation. Within this context, Marwan M. Kraidy’s analysis of popular culture is particularly relevant: organizational practices increasingly operate within a media-saturated environment where commercial imperatives shape symbols, narratives, and values. Corporate communication, digital marketing, and platform-based enterprises draw upon popular culture logics to construct influence, legitimacy, and competitive advantage³².

In government and public administration, the Internet underpins the development of e-governance, transforming not only service delivery but also the cultural dynamics of political communication. Online platforms allow citizens to access services, engage with policy debates, and interact with state institutions, contributing to greater transparency and administrative efficiency. However, as Kraidy suggests, popular culture, circulated through digital media, intersects with governance by shaping political imagery, public discourse, and civic identities. Government

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 28–32.

²⁹ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 02-08

³⁰ Denis McQuail, “The Influence and Effects of Mass Media,” in *Mass Communication and Society*, ed. James Curran, Michael Gurevitch, and Janet Woollacott (Beverly Hills and London: Sage Publications, 1977), 74-75

³¹ Ibid.

³² Marwan M. Kraidy, “Popular Culture,” in *Media and Society*, 6th ed., ed. James Curran and David Hesmondhalgh (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 1992), 21-25.

communication increasingly relies on media aesthetics, narratives, and symbolic performances that reflect the influence of popular culture within industrial modernity and late capitalism³³.

In education, the Internet expands access to knowledge and enables flexible learning environments, while also embedding educational institutions within digital popular culture. Online learning platforms, social media, and interactive content blur the boundaries between formal education and entertainment, reflecting what Kraidy identifies as the commodification and circulation of culture in networked environments. These dynamics influence pedagogical practices, learner engagement, and institutional authority, requiring educators to negotiate between critical knowledge formation and the pervasive influence of media-driven cultural forms³⁴.

The healthcare sector similarly reflects the cultural dimensions of digital transformation. Internet-enabled services such as telemedicine and digital health platforms improve access and coordination of care, yet they also operate within a popular culture framework that shapes perceptions of health, wellness, and medical expertise. Online health narratives, influencer-driven content, and digital branding affect patient expectations and trust, illustrating how organizational communication in healthcare is increasingly intertwined with media culture and symbolic representation³⁵.

Despite these benefits, the Internet has also generated significant social challenges. Manuel Castells³⁶ notes that, under certain conditions, intensive Internet use may intensify loneliness, alienation, and weakened social ties. Sherry Turkle similarly argues that digital interaction can create an illusion of intimacy that conceals emotional isolation. What appears to be genuine companionship in digital spaces, she contends, often conceals deeper loneliness and disconnection³⁷. Fidelis Patrick Udo, drawing on Alan Macfarlane, critiques the “standardlessness” of the Internet, marked by moral and epistemic instability fueled by the unchecked spread of misinformation. As Denis McQuail observes, this environment has blurred the boundaries between truth and falsehood, contributing to fragmented knowledge, contested authority, and shifting social values in contemporary digital culture³⁸.

Moreover, at the broader level, digital divides, cybersecurity risks, misinformation, and data privacy concerns undermine equitable access and institutional trust. From Kraidy’s perspective, the dominance of commercially driven popular culture further complicates governance and organizational integrity by privileging visibility, spectacle, and consumption over critical deliberation. These tensions highlight that the Internet’s organizational impact extends beyond technical efficiency to encompass cultural power, symbolic control, and the contested negotiation of meaning within an increasingly mediated society³⁹.

1.3. The social media and AI age (2000s–Present)

Social media has become a defining feature of contemporary communication, reshaping public opinion, social relationships, and economic engagement. It refers to digital platforms that enable the creation, sharing, and interaction of user-generated content—such as text, images, and videos—within virtual communities through service-specific profiles and interactive features. Based on function, social media encompasses social networking sites, microblogging platforms, media-sharing networks, discussion forums, live-streaming services, and emerging

³³ David Brown, “Electronic Government and Public Administration,” *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 71, no. 2 (2005): 241–254, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020852305053883>

³⁴ Pahar Kurniadi Salfin and Erwin Erwin, “Sciences du Nord Humanities and Social Sciences,” *Sciences du Nord Humanities and Social Sciences* 1, no. 1 (January 2024): 1–7, <https://north-press.com/index.php/snhss>

³⁵ Laurence Baker, Todd H. Wagner, Sara Singer, and M. Kate Bundorf, “Use of the Internet and E-mail for Health Care Information: Results from a National Survey,” *JAMA* 289, no. 18 (May 14, 2003): 2401–2405.

³⁶ Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 2nd ed., (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 387-389

³⁷ Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 01-04.

³⁸ Fidelis Patrick Udo, “The Media Culture and the Democratization of Information: The Role of the Church in Fostering Media Education,” *EJ* 14 (2023): 169–193.

³⁹ Marwan M. Kraidy, “Popular Culture,” in *Media and Society*, 6th ed., ed. James Curran and David Hesmondhalgh (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 1992), 21-25.

Since the early 2000s, platforms such as MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter (X), WhatsApp, and Instagram have progressively transformed how individuals communicate, exchange information, and participate in social and cultural life. Over time, social media has diversified beyond basic networking and content sharing to include real-time communication, multimedia streaming, mobile-based messaging, and visually oriented storytelling. More recent decentralized and blockchain-based platforms, such as Minds, Mastodon, and Bluesky, reflect growing efforts to address concerns about corporate control, data exploitation, and governance by promoting transparency, participatory structures, and user control over digital value⁴¹.

In recent years, the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) has further transformed social media into an intelligent, adaptive, and data-driven communication environment. AI enables content personalization, automated moderation, recommendation systems, and enhanced user interaction, significantly shaping online behavior and public discourse. Formally established as a scientific discipline in 1956, AI has evolved through cycles of innovation and stagnation, from early symbolic and rule-based systems to contemporary data-driven approaches. Advances in machine learning, natural language processing, and computer vision—supported by increased computational power and big data—have positioned AI as a central driver of digital innovation. As a result, social media now functions not merely as a medium for information exchange but as a powerful socio-technical system that actively structures communication, cultural production, and social interaction⁴².

As social media has expanded and become a central force in contemporary communication, it has exerted profound influences on individuals, societies, and organizations. At the individual level, social media functions as a platform for sharing values, beliefs, and personal experiences, thereby fostering interaction and relationship-building. Through ongoing exchanges, individuals form virtual communities that often develop into broader social groups. These platforms also contribute to the democratization of knowledge by providing access to diverse information and perspectives, while encouraging lifelong learning through continuous participation in global digital spaces. Features such as video calls, group chats, and online communities further support emotional connection and mutual support, enabling relationships to be sustained across physical distance⁴³.

At the societal level, Manuel Castells' concept of digital culture highlights how electronic communication, virtual reality, and interactive networks have transformed human communication and culture. This global, multimedia, and interactive form of communication has reshaped communities into virtual networks organized around shared interests or goals. These virtual communities may be formal or informal, operate synchronously or asynchronously, and represent a new mode of social organization in contemporary society⁴⁴.

Castells further argues that virtual communities should be understood as real communities, as they enable relationship formation, mutual support, and shared identity through continuous online interaction. Although often based on weak social ties, these networks facilitate communication across distance at minimal cost and combine the reach of mass communication with the intimacy of interpersonal exchange. By allowing individuals to participate in multiple networks simultaneously, virtual communities can expand social belonging and reinforce personal identity in an increasingly connected world⁴⁵.

⁴⁰ Tahereh Saheb, Mouwafac Sidaoui, and Bill Schmarzo, "Convergence of Artificial Intelligence with Social Media: A Bibliometric and Qualitative Analysis," *Telematics and Informatics Reports* 14 (2024): 100146, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.teler.2024.100146>

⁴¹ Penny Candace Deans and Betsy Jane Miller Tretola, "The Evolution of Social Media and Its Impact on Organizations and Leaders," *Journal of Organizational Computing and Electronic Commerce* 28, no. 3 (2018): 173–192, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10919392.2018.1484597>

⁴² Yujia Zhai, Jiaqi Yan, Hezhao Zhang, and Wei Lu, "Tracing the Evolution of AI: Conceptualization of Artificial Intelligence in Mass Media Discourse," *Information Discovery and Delivery* (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1108/IDD-01-2020-0007>

⁴³ Charles Alves de Castro, Isobel O'Reilly, and Aiden Carthy, "The Evolution of the Internet and Social Media: A Literature Review," *International Journal of e-Education, e-Business, e-Management and e-Learning* 12, no. 1 (2022): 30–41, <https://doi.org/10.17706/ijeeeee.2022.12.1.30-41>

⁴⁴ Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 2nd ed., *Ibid.* 354–384

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

At the organizational level, advances in communication technology have generated significant benefits across multiple sectors, particularly in politics, education, marketing, and healthcare. In politics, social media and artificial intelligence (AI) have transformed political communication by enabling rapid and targeted information dissemination and more direct interaction between leaders and citizens. Digital platforms are now central to electoral campaigns, providing spaces where candidates present policies and engage the public. Beyond campaigning, online forums and digital consultations have expanded opportunities for civic participation, promoting transparency, accountability, and inclusion in democratic processes⁴⁶.

In education, digital communication technologies have reshaped learning environments by making knowledge more interactive, flexible, and accessible. Platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok support collaboration, creativity, and global exchange, allowing learners to access information beyond traditional classrooms. These tools contribute to the development of digital literacy, language skills, and cultural awareness, while enabling diverse forms of expression across listening, speaking, reading, and writing. When used effectively, social media and digital platforms foster active engagement, curiosity, and innovative approaches to learning⁴⁷.

Marketing has likewise been transformed through the integration of AI and data-driven communication technologies. AI enables organizations to analyze large volumes of consumer data, personalize content, and deliver targeted messages that enhance customer engagement and purchasing behavior. Advanced tools such as facial recognition, behavioral analysis, and predictive algorithms further support personalized services and strategic decision-making. As a result, communication technology has reshaped how businesses operate, compete, and connect with global audiences⁴⁸.

Advancements in communication technology have also influenced healthcare by improving access to health information and facilitating communication between patients and professionals. Digitally mediated access can enhance patient confidence, autonomy, and participation in self-care, while also supporting more efficient healthcare delivery. However, the extent of these benefits remains difficult to measure, and access to online health information does not equally benefit all users, particularly those who already possess adequate medical knowledge⁴⁹.

Despite these benefits, growing reliance on social media also presents significant social risks. Virtual communities lack many of the embodied, face-to-face interactions that sustain deep emotional bonds in physical communities. Online communication is frequently fragmented and asynchronous, contributing to a privatization of sociability that prioritizes personal networks over collective life. While digital platforms increase opportunities for connection, they often encourage superficial interaction and emotional detachment, which may intensify social isolation and weaken traditional forms of communal solidarity⁵⁰.

Moreover, the pervasive use of social media raises concerns about identity erosion and cultural influence. Constant self-disclosure blurs the boundary between public and private life, increasing vulnerability to data exploitation and identity theft. As Denis McQuail emphasizes, media influence operates through identification and internalization, whereby individuals adopt values and norms promoted through digital culture. Exposure to idealized images, consumerism, or hostile discourse can normalize superficiality, materialism, and aggression, positioning social media not merely as a communication tool but as a powerful agent shaping personal identity and collective social

⁴⁶ Ibid. 390.

⁴⁷ Pahar Kurniadi Salfin and Erwin Erwin, "Sciences du Nord Humanities and Social Sciences," *Sciences du Nord Humanities and Social Sciences* 1, no. 1 (January 2024): 1–7, <https://north-press.com/index.php/snhss>

⁴⁸ Abid Haleem, Mohd Javaid, Mohd Asim Qadri, Ravi Pratap Singh, and Rajiv Suman, "Artificial Intelligence (AI) Applications for Marketing: A Literature-Based Study," *International Journal of Intelligent Networks* 3 (2022): 119–132, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijin.2022.08.005>

⁴⁹ Laurence Baker, Todd H. Wagner, Sara Singer, and M. Kate Bundorf, "Use of the Internet and E-mail for Health Care Information: Results From a National Survey," *JAMA* 289, no. 18 (2003), 2400–2406, <http://jama.jamanetwork.com>

⁵⁰ Ibid. 384

Digital communication also poses substantial challenges at the organizational level. In governance, the rapid spread of misinformation and algorithm-driven political messaging can distort public opinion, erode trust in institutions, and intensify polarization. In marketing, data-driven advertising risks exploiting consumer vulnerabilities and undermining ethical standards. In education, excessive reliance on fast-paced, image-centered platforms may weaken attention spans, critical thinking, and deep learning. These challenges highlight the need for responsible, ethical, and balanced use of communication technologies to ensure they strengthen, rather than undermine, organizational effectiveness and social well-being⁵².

1.4. Ethical considerations

Digital communication technology has evolved through successive innovations that redefine how humans connect, share, and create meaning. Each stage—from the telegraph to artificial intelligence—has expanded the boundaries of interaction while introducing new ethical and social challenges.

At the individual level, digital media foster self-expression and global participation but often blur the distinction between authentic identity and constructed personas. The constant visibility of social media erodes privacy and promotes self-curation over genuine communication.

At the organizational and societal levels, digital platforms revolutionize governance, education, and business, yet they also amplify misinformation, consumerism, and surveillance. These developments underscore the paradox of progress: every technological breakthrough deepens human connectivity even as it complicates moral responsibility and social cohesion.

Thus, the evolution of digital communication is not merely technological—it is profoundly cultural and ethical. It demands ongoing reflection on how innovation should serve humanity's collective well-being rather than merely its convenience or control.

2. *Communio et progressio: The church's vision of social communication*

Communio et Progressio, a Pastoral Instruction on social communication, was elaborated and published in 1971 by the Pontifical Commission for the Means of Social Communications (formerly the Pontifical Commission for Cinema, Radio, and Television). Having been considered the *Magna Carta* of Christian communication, a sixty-six-page document develops and expands key themes introduced in earlier ecclesial texts, *Inter Mirifica*, the Second Vatican Council's decree on social communication. It provides a coherent conceptual framework that underpins the developments envisioned in *Inter Mirifica* and responds to several of the theological and pastoral concerns raised during its conciliar deliberations. To this day, *Communio et Progressio* remains the most comprehensive and authoritative articulation of the Vatican's teaching on social communication. In continuity with earlier magisterial documents, it elucidates relevant doctrine, critically examines the dynamics of modern social communication practices, and proposes concrete pastoral and policy-oriented recommendations⁵³.

2.1. Self-giving love in the trinity: A Theological perspective

Communio et Progressio has, from the beginning, been widely regarded as one of the most positive Church documents on social communication. Beyond introducing a renewed understanding of the nature and significance of social communication, the document is distinguished by the depth, detail, and nuance with which it addresses the theological, moral, and social dimensions of communication in its fully developed form. Particularly significant for the advancement of the Church's teaching on social communication are its treatments of the rights, freedoms, and

⁵¹ Denis McQuail, "The Influence and Effects of Mass Media," in *Mass Communication and Society*, ed. James Curran, Michael Gurevitch, and Janet Woollacott, *Loc.Cit.* 75-76

⁵² Pahar Kurniadi Salfin and Erwin Erwin, "Sciences du Nord Humanities and Social Sciences," *Sciences du Nord Humanities and Social Sciences* 1, no. 1 (January 2024): 1–7, *Loc.Cit.*

⁵³ James F. Caccamo, "The Message on the Media: Seventy Years of Catholic Social Teaching on Social Communication," *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 15, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2008): 407.

duties inherent in communication processes, its balanced approach to media regulation, and its sustained attention to the formation of priests in this field⁵⁴.

With respect to renewed understanding of the nature of communication, *Communio et Progressio* articulates a marked shift from earlier ecclesial documents, which tended to conceive social communication primarily as a natural human faculty oriented toward the transmission of information, especially for educational purposes. The document advances a theological framework that conceives communication as an act of “self-giving in love,” grounding it within a relational understanding of human interaction⁵⁵. Communication is thus understood not merely as the expression of ideas or emotions, but as a dynamic movement of one person toward another. Consequently, its purpose extends beyond instruction or information-sharing to the formation of unity between the communicator and the recipient. Authentic communication—characterized by sincerity, honesty, and truthfulness—fosters genuine communion among those engaged in the act of communication⁵⁶.

Eilers further clarifies this understanding by appealing to the Latin root *communis*, meaning “common.” The term derives from the stem *mun*, which connotes a shared enclosure or surrounding wall. Those who are in communion—who communicate—are thus understood as inhabiting a common space and environment, united “behind the same wall,” where mutual dependence and relational presence are constitutive. This etymological insight is reinforced by the related Latin term *munus*, meaning “gift,” “service,” or “obligation.” Together, these roots suggest that communication is not merely the exchange of information but a relational act of self-giving, in which the communicator places themselves at the service of others. Through this act of sharing—of oneself and of meaning—something genuinely common is brought into being⁵⁷.

This renewed understanding of the nature of social communication is rooted in a fundamental rearticulation of its origin. In *Communio et Progressio*, social communication is understood primarily not as a human initiative or technical process, but as a divine act in which human communication participates in a secondary, derivative, and necessarily imperfect manner. Communication is thus grounded in the very being and activity of God, whose self-revelation and relational life provide the ultimate model for all authentic communication. Social communication finds its fullest expression in the communicative life of God, where self-gift is intrinsic rather than instrumental, and where communication is ordered toward relationship rather than mere information exchange. In this divine context, the ultimate end of communication—communion—is perfectly realized, as self-giving love generates unity without erasing distinction⁵⁸.

Greshake, as cited by Ahn Vu Ta, further develops the notion of Trinitarian communion by emphasizing that it is not merely a speculative construct, but the real communication of the three divine persons, who live the one divine life through mutual self-communication within a threefold dynamism of love. Each divine person communicates itself to the others in a manner proper and unique to that person, such that the distinct moments of self-communication together constitute a dynamic and reciprocal process within the Trinitarian life. Greshake characterizes this intra-divine sharing of life as a “rhythm of love,” wherein each person may be understood as a distinct rhythm that fulfills its proper role within a single communicative event⁵⁹.

Within this relational dynamic, each divine person exists in its own irreducible identity precisely in relation “from” and “toward” the others, through a continual movement of giving and receiving, receiving and giving, and through a unifying process of receiving, returning, and shared self-donation. These relational movements do not diminish personal distinction but rather constitute it within the unity of divine life. In Trinitarian theology, this mode of mutual indwelling and dynamic relationality is traditionally expressed by the concept of *perichōrēsis*, which articulates how the divine persons fully dwell in one another without confusion or loss of identity, while sharing

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 408

⁵⁵ Pontifical Commission for Social Communications, *Communio et Progressio* (1971), 8-11

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Frans-Josef Eilers, *Communicating in Ministry and Mission* (Manila: Logos-Divine Word Publications, 2018), 37-38.

⁵⁸ Pontifical Commission for Social Communications, *Communio et Progressio* (1971), 7-8

⁵⁹ Anh Vu Ta, *Social Communication in Theological Perspective: Communication Theology*, (Manila: Logos-Divine Word Publications, 2015), 49

one and the same divine essence. In this way, perichōrēsis safeguards both the real distinction of the persons and the perfect unity of God, presenting divine communion as an eternal and living exchange of self-giving love⁶⁰.

Subsequently, the eternal communion of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit exemplifies communication as total self-giving that culminates in perfect unity. This divine communication also extends beyond the Trinity itself, as God speaks the world into existence and enters into a relationship with creation. God's self-communication reaches its definitive fullness in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, through whom God is spoken into human history so that a restored unity between God and humanity might be effected. In Christ—who is simultaneously the perfect communication and the perfect communicator—God communicates his very self in order to heal the rupture introduced by the fall and to overcome the divisions, including linguistic and relational fragmentation, that ensued⁶¹.

Through Christ, humanity receives the gift of the Holy Spirit, and in the institution of the Eucharist, encounters the most complete and intimate form of communion between God and human beings attainable in this life. As disclosed in both intra-Trinitarian relations and the divine-human encounter, social communication is thus fundamentally a divine act of self-giving, ordered toward the realization of the full unity that the concept of "communion" signifies⁶².

2.2. *Rights, freedom, and duty: Fundamental moral norms*

Communio et Progressio offers a more developed understanding of the rights, freedoms, and duties associated with social communication, particularly regarding the right to information. This right is grounded in the necessity of social communication for the proper functioning of human society, since the free flow of accurate and relevant information enables the ongoing exchange that makes mutual understanding, responsible participation, and cooperative action possible⁶³. Without such communication, both everyday social life and political participation would be undermined, as citizens cannot meaningfully engage in public affairs without the information needed for informed judgment. Accordingly, individuals possess a fundamental right to truthful and relevant information concerning matters that affect both their personal lives and the common good of the social body. In this respect, *Communio et Progressio* advances beyond *Inter Mirifica*, which affirmed the right to information but did not offer a systematic theoretical grounding or explore its broader social and policy implications.

While strictly maintaining a focus on truthfulness, information, however, is not a one-way street, flowing only from society to the individual. Those in positions of responsibility within a society require relevant and accurate information about the views of the social body on critical issues of the day to govern well. The two-way flow of information, which provides equal space to both society and the individual through a balanced perspective, must always be taken into account. Social communication, in this sense, plays a central role in this process by facilitating the articulation of public opinion, which *Communio et Progressio* identifies as the essential expression of human nature organized in society⁶⁴. The document subsequently underscores the critical importance of public opinion to the well-being of the social body. It asserts that all members of society have a responsibility to contribute to its formation by expressing their perspectives on matters of common concern. Crucially, the exercise of this responsibility depends on the freedom of individual speech, which is not limited to those holding formal positions in the media or in governance. Rather, because every member of society participates in the pursuit of the common good, the right and freedom to speak and be heard belong equally to all.

The document additionally affirms that freedom of communication, particularly for those engaged in the press, is essential to human life and the common good⁶⁵. It recognizes that the press serves a vital social function by providing information to which people have a right. This freedom includes protection from external pressure, coercion, or intimidation. It also entails the responsibility and the ability to communicate truthful, accurate, and

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Communio et Progressio*, 8

⁶² *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 34, 36, 44-47

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 24-32.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

relevant information. Such freedom allows those in positions of responsibility to remain adequately informed about the views and concerns of the social body. In this way, freedom of communication supports responsible governance and contributes to social cohesion.

While emphasizing the rights, duties, and freedoms of information in the public sphere, the document also pays more attention to the life of the Church itself. Drawing on Pope Pius XII, the document emphasizes that, as a living body, the Church requires public opinion to sustain a genuine exchange among her members; without such communication, she cannot progress in thought or action. Accordingly, *Communio et Progressio* calls for a steady two-way flow of information between ecclesiastical authorities and the faithful at all levels, affirming that balanced and free dialogue within the Church strengthens, rather than undermines, unity and solidarity⁶⁶.

At the same time, the document acknowledges the need for discernment, particularly in distinguishing legitimate theological inquiry from official magisterial teaching, while affirming that scholars must enjoy the freedom necessary to communicate the fruits of their research. Although certain circumstances may justify limits on disclosure, *Communio et Progressio* warns against making secrecy the norm, noting that the absence of transparency gives rise to rumor and distortion. Guided by the criteria of faith and love, the document ultimately seeks to balance open communication with the preservation of ecclesial unity, presenting dialogue as a condition for authentic communion rather than a threat to it⁶⁷.

Another concern addressed in *Communio et Progressio* is the regulation of the media, an area in which the instruction represents a notable departure from earlier ecclesial approaches. In contrast to previous Church documents that emphasized control and prohibition, *Communio et Progressio* marks a clear shift away from strict external regulation of media content⁶⁸. Significantly, it refrains from providing lists of banned films, from calling for organized pressure or boycotts against media producers, or from urging broadcasters to privilege explicitly religious or morally edifying programming. This restraint signals a broader reorientation in the Church's engagement with modern media, emphasizing responsibility and dialogue over direct intervention.

While the document does not deny the legitimate role of public authority in safeguarding the moral order, it strongly underscores the need to respect human freedom to the greatest extent possible. Consequently, censorship is not presented as a normal or preferred instrument of media regulation, but rather as a measure justified only in exceptional circumstances and as a last resort. In this sense, censorship is to be employed only in what the document describes as the "very last extremity." This position reflects an increased awareness of the dangers of excessive control, alongside a renewed emphasis on individual and social responsibility in communication processes⁶⁹.

As such, rather than approaching the media with suspicion, *Communio et Progressio* adopts an affirmative stance toward the means of social communication. It situates media within a theological framework that recognizes their legitimate place in the histories of Creation, the Incarnation, and Redemption. The document acknowledges the presence of distortions and morally problematic content in contemporary media. Nevertheless, it expresses confidence in the capacity of individuals and communities to engage media critically through dialogue. In this way, media practices can promote human dignity and serve the common good⁷⁰.

Regarding this concern, therefore, *Communio et Progressio* places strong emphasis on "personal responsibility and self-control" in the use of media⁷¹. The instruction highlights the critical importance of formation for both "communicators" and "recipients" of social communication. While communicators may be highly skilled in the technical dimensions of media production, they often lack the "human qualities" necessary to create content that genuinely serves human dignity and the wider social good. With appropriate training and guidance, however,

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 115, 119.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 121, 42.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 41, 87, 76.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 15

⁷¹ *Ibid.* 90

communicators can develop the ethical sensitivity and professional competence required to produce media oriented toward the common good⁷².

At the same time, *Communio et Progressio* stresses that recipients of communication also bear responsibility. Audiences are called to become active and discerning participants in the communication process—persons capable of interpreting media accurately and evaluating messages in light of their origin, context, and overall content. Through education in the home, the parish, and other formative settings, both children and adults are encouraged to deepen their understanding of social communication so that they may develop sound judgment and the ability to act in accordance with those judgments. Throughout the document, bishops, priests, and lay Catholics are exhorted to develop pastoral plans that support this form of media education⁷³.

The key point emphasized here is the importance of protecting both freedom of the press and individual freedom of expression. *Communio et Progressio* supports the regulation of social communication, not to control content, but to safeguard the freedoms, rights, and responsibilities that are essential to its social functions⁷⁴. These protections help ensure that citizens can access reliable information while also fulfilling their responsibility to participate thoughtfully in public discourse. By stressing both ethical formation and the defense of fundamental freedoms, *Communio et Progressio* offers a framework in which media can be used responsibly to promote human development and the common good.

3. Ethical evaluation of digital communication in light of communio et progressio

As discussed earlier, digital communication has become a defining feature of interpersonal relationships and a powerful influence on social, economic, and political life. As Manuel Castells observes, contemporary society can be understood as a “network society,” in which social interactions are increasingly mediated through digital platforms⁷⁵. In this context, interpersonal communication and organizational mass communication converge within a shared digital environment, enabling constant connectivity and the rapid circulation of information across homes and workplaces. While digital communication offers significant opportunities to promote the common good, it also presents serious ethical challenges that require careful reflection and guidance. *Communio et Progressio* provides a valuable ethical framework for addressing these challenges, emphasizing the need to ensure that the use of digital communication upholds human dignity, responsibility, and the common good.

3.1. Communication as a means of communion

Communio et Progressio explains communication by grounding it in the life of the Trinity. God is understood as a communion of three divine persons who live in constant, loving communication with one another. In this relationship, each person shares fully in the one divine being and freely gives themselves to the others. From this understanding, all human communication takes its origin. Because human beings are created in God’s image and likeness, our capacity to communicate reflects this divine self-giving and relational nature⁷⁶.

As beings created in the image and likeness of God, human persons therefore possess an inherent capacity and a fundamental calling to communicate. This capacity is rooted not only in the human ability to use language or symbols, but more deeply in the relational nature of the human person, who is oriented toward others from the very beginning of existence. Communication, in this sense, is not merely a functional or instrumental activity aimed at the exchange of information, but a constitutive dimension of human life through which individuals transcend themselves, express their interiority, and enter into meaningful relationships with others. Through communication, persons come to know one another, to share experiences and values, and to build bonds of trust and solidarity that sustain both personal identity and social life. The familiar insight that “no man is an island” aptly captures this relational reality, underscoring the fact that human life cannot be sustained—either personally or socially—without communication⁷⁷.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 82

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 123, 125. See also 109, 111, 120, 133, and 164-180

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 82

⁷⁵ Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 2nd ed., 28-31

⁷⁶ *Communio et Progressio*, *Ibid.* 8-11

⁷⁷ Anh Vu Ta, *Social Communication in Theological Perspective: Communication Theology*, *Ibid.*, 57-58

Human communication, however, never occurs in a vacuum. It is continually shaped and conditioned by a complex interaction of psychological, social, political, cultural, and religious factors that evolve over time. In the contemporary context, these influences are increasingly mediated by digital culture, characterized by immediacy, constant connectivity, interactivity, and the rapid circulation of information. Digital communication reshapes attention, patterns of social interaction, and the formation of identity and community, while also introducing challenges such as fragmentation of discourse, information overload, algorithmic influence, and the blurring of boundaries between public and private life⁷⁸.

Despite these changing contexts and forms, the ultimate orientation of human communication remains communion. *Communio et Progressio* emphasizes that communication reaches its highest purpose when it promotes genuine relationships, mutual understanding, and shared life. Within digital culture, this ethical and theological orientation becomes especially significant, as communication risks being reduced to speed, efficiency, or mere information exchange. In this light, Jesus Christ is presented as the definitive model of authentic communication⁷⁹. Through his words, actions, and self-giving love, he consistently reached out to others, overcame divisions, and drew people into deeper communion with one another and with God. His communicative life reveals that true communication—whether mediated through traditional or digital means—is not simply the transmission of information but a transformative act ordered toward unity, reconciliation, and participation in the divine life⁸⁰.

Furthermore, from a Trinitarian theological perspective, every person involved in communication—whether as sender or receiver—is called to respect the dignity of the other. Genuine communication is possible only when this mutual respect is upheld. Such respect forms the ethical foundation of equality in every human encounter, including those mediated through digital platforms, where each participant must be recognized as an active subject rather than a passive consumer or data point. In ethical digital communication, individuals are called to engage in ways that support the self-realization and self-determination of others, contributing to relationships that move toward authentic community rather than isolation or domination⁸¹.

This perspective directly challenges unethical practices in digital communication, such as manipulation, exploitation, misinformation, harassment, and the instrumentalization of persons for profit, influence, or self-interest. No one should be reduced to an object, an algorithmic target, or a means to achieve personal or institutional gain. Instead, communication in digital environments should aim to enrich human personality and promote integral human development. When grounded in respect for human dignity, digital communication can become a space for dialogue, solidarity, and shared growth, reflecting the Trinitarian ideal of mutual self-giving and communion.

3.2. Freedom and truth in communication: An ethical imperative

In *Communio et Progressio*, freedom is not conceived as an autonomous or absolute individual right, but as a relational good intrinsically linked to truth, responsibility, and the common good. The document situates social communication within a moral and social framework oriented toward communion, understood as the unity and advancement of persons and peoples. Communication is, therefore, not morally neutral; it carries an inherent ethical orientation⁸². Freedom of expression finds its authentic meaning only when it serves truth and contributes to the formation of genuine human relationships. When freedom is reduced to unrestrained individual liberty, detached from truth and concern for others, it is emptied of its ethical content and loses its genuinely human significance⁸³.

A central insight of *Communio et Progressio* is that human freedom is necessarily shared freedom. Communication

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 57

⁷⁹ *Communio et Progressio, Ibid.*, 11.

⁸⁰ Frans-Josef Eilers, *Communicating in Community: An Introduction to Social Communication*, 4th ed., (Manila: Logos-Divine Word Publications, 2009), 54-58.

⁸¹ Anh Vu Ta, *Ibid.* 57

⁸² *Communio et Progressio, Ibid.*, 17

⁸³ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, "Truth and Freedom," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 23, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 28-32.

always occurs within a network of interpersonal and social relationships, and the exercise of freedom by one communicator inevitably affects others. For this reason, the document emphasizes that rights, norms, and ethical standards are not the conceptual opposites of freedom but its necessary conditions. Order and justice do not suppress freedom; rather, they make freedom possible by protecting human dignity, ensuring fairness, and enabling meaningful participation in shaping public opinion. Without such structures, communication risks becoming a tool of power rather than a means of communion.⁸⁴

This vision acquires particular urgency in the context of digital communication. Digital platforms have radically expanded the reach, speed, and influence of communication, often encouraging an understanding of freedom as unrestricted self-expression. From the perspective of *Communio et Progressio*, such a view is problematic because it tends to separate freedom from truth and moral responsibility. The widespread circulation of misinformation, disinformation, hate speech, and manipulative content demonstrates how communication detached from ethical norms undermines trust, damages social relationships, and erodes the foundations of communal life.

Furthermore, *Communio et Progressio* explicitly rejects the notion that freedom is increased through the indefinite expansion of individual rights without corresponding duties. Authentic freedom, according to the document, grows through an increase in responsibility. Applied to digital communication, this insight highlights the shared moral responsibility of users, content creators, media professionals, and platform regulators for the quality of the digital public sphere. Digital freedom must be evaluated not simply by the absence of restrictions, but by its contribution to the common good, its fidelity to truth, and its capacity to foster respectful and constructive dialogue⁸⁵.

Finally, *Communio et Progressio* maintains that genuine liberation in communication does not result from the abolition of norms or moral constraints, but from their continual purification and proper application. In the digital age, this calls for the development of ethical frameworks, sustained media education, and responsible forms of governance that respect both freedom and human dignity. By promoting a communication culture rooted in truth and ordered toward communion, *Communio et Progressio* offers a normative vision in which digital media serve authentic human development, strengthen social bonds, and safeguard freedom understood in its fullest human and moral sense⁸⁶.

3.3. *Communication and media education*

Another significant contribution of *Communio et Progressio* is its strong emphasis on media literacy as an essential component of ethical social communication. The document understands media education as a formative process that grounds individuals in the basic principles governing how media operate within human society. When the nature, function, and influence of the media are properly understood, the means of social communication can genuinely enrich the human intellect and contribute to personal and social development. Without such formation, engagement with media—particularly digital media—risks becoming uncritical and disorienting, comparable to entering an unfamiliar terrain without guidance or orientation⁸⁷.

Communio et Progressio further insists that media education is not optional but necessary, and that it must begin at an early stage of human formation. The document explicitly states that it is “never too early” to encourage in children an appreciation of artistic expression, the development of a critical faculty, and a sense of personal responsibility grounded in sound moral principles. This early formation is essential because media, even in subtle ways, shape perceptions, values, and patterns of behavior. A deep understanding of media, therefore, requires not only technical knowledge but also moral discernment and reflective judgment, cultivated gradually through education and experience⁸⁸.

In addition, *Communio et Progressio* recognizes that genuine media literacy demands more than passive consumption or surface-level familiarity. It calls for a level of understanding that enables individuals to interpret

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Communio et Progressio, Ibid.*, 19.

⁸⁶ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Frans-Josef Eilers, *Communicating in Community: An Introduction to Social Communication, Ibid.*, 272-273

⁸⁸ *Communio et Progressio, Ibid.*, 34, 48

media content critically, assess its intentions and effects, and respond to it responsibly. In the context of digital communication, this insight is particularly relevant, as users are no longer merely recipients of information but active participants and content creators. Media literacy thus becomes a condition for responsible digital freedom, allowing individuals to engage online in ways that respect truth, dignity, and the common good⁸⁹.

The document also highlights the importance of considering the distinctive character of each medium, as well as its social role within specific cultural and local contexts. *Communio et Progressio* does not treat media as culturally neutral instruments; rather, it emphasizes their embeddedness in particular communities and traditions. This perspective underscores the need to evaluate how digital media function within local cultures, how they shape collective identities, and how they can be used most effectively to promote authentic communication and human development. Media education, therefore, must be attentive not only to global communication dynamics but also to local cultural realities⁹⁰.

Taken together, these insights reveal that *Communio et Progressio* envisions media literacy as a comprehensive ethical and cultural formation. It equips individuals to navigate the complexities of digital communication with critical awareness, moral responsibility, and cultural sensitivity. In doing so, the document affirms that responsible engagement with media is indispensable to the formation of mature persons and to the creation of a communicative environment that truly serves communion and human progress.

Conclusion

This study has shown that digital communication technology, while offering unprecedented opportunities for connectivity, participation, and access to information, also introduces profound ethical, cultural, and theological challenges. Across its historical development—from early computing to the Internet, social media, and artificial intelligence—digital communication reveals a persistent tension between technological progress and its impact on human dignity, truth, freedom, and social cohesion. Digital media reshape how persons relate, how institutions function, and how meaning is constructed, making ethical reflection not optional but indispensable.

Communio et Progressio provides a coherent and enduring framework for addressing these challenges. Its central insight—that communication is fundamentally oriented toward communion—reorients digital ethics away from mere efficiency, control, or unrestricted expression. Grounded in a Trinitarian theology of self-giving love, the document understands communication as a relational act ordered toward unity, mutual recognition, and the common good. Within this vision, freedom is not absolute individual autonomy but shared freedom, inseparably linked to truth, responsibility, and justice. Rights, norms, and ethical standards are not obstacles to freedom but the very conditions that make authentic freedom and genuine dialogue possible.

The relevance of *Communio et Progressio* for contemporary digital ethics is therefore considerable. In an environment marked by misinformation, algorithmic manipulation, surveillance, polarization, and the commodification of attention, the document's insistence on truth, responsibility, and moral formation offers a critical corrective. Its emphasis on media education, beginning from an early age and attentive to cultural contexts, directly addresses the need for digitally literate and ethically discerning participants in today's networked public sphere. Likewise, its balanced approach to media regulation—favoring responsibility and dialogue over control—remains highly applicable in debates on platform governance, content moderation, and digital rights.

Looking ahead, future ethical reflection on social communication must continue to engage emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, data analytics, and immersive media through the lens of human dignity and communion. This requires interdisciplinary dialogue among theology, ethics, communication studies, and technology, as well as renewed attention to structural injustices such as digital inequality and cultural marginalization. Ethical reflection must also move beyond individual behavior to address institutional responsibility and the moral design of digital systems themselves.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Frans-Josef Eilers, *Communicating in Community: An Introduction to Social Communication*, *Ibid.*, 273

Ultimately, *Communio et Progressio* invites a final theological and ethical reflection: digital communication, like all human communication, participates—however imperfectly—in God’s own self-communication. When oriented toward truth, respect, and self-giving love, digital media can become instruments of solidarity, dialogue, and human flourishing. When detached from these foundations, they risk dehumanization and fragmentation. The enduring task, therefore, is to shape digital communication practices and structures so that they truly serve communion, reflect the relational nature of the human person, and contribute to the integral development of individuals and societies in the digital age.

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