



Final Statement on Changing Media in a Changing World



«An epochal change»

Pope Francis has repeatedly called attention to the fact that “what we are experiencing is *not simply an epoch of changes, but an epochal change*. We find ourselves living at a time when change is no longer linear, but epochal. It entails decisions that rapidly transform our ways of living, of relating to one another, of communicating and thinking, of how different generations relate to one another and how we understand and experience faith and science”.^[1] One of the features (and perhaps the main feature) of this style of transformation is the close interdependence of the factors that contribute to it. This interdependence is all the more effective if not exhibited and apparent – the more, that is, the different areas that contribute to change seem to operate in spheres separate from each other. A typical example is that of the new digital media, which while presenting themselves as more or less innocent instruments of entertainment, actually move enormous and complex economic, political and geopolitical, cognitive, anthropological and social transformations. Three aspects of this complex ecosystem in transformation are addressed: its foundation consisting in the new business models of data capitalism; its developments with regard to new concepts and new practices of communication; and finally, some possible lines of proaction and design that take place within it.

Data capitalism as a new form of global capitalism

The radical novelty of the transition from traditional media to digital platforms is the advent of a new business model. This is based on the apparent gratuitousness (at least partial) of many tools to enjoy or produce content; in reality, digital platforms have accompanied a content *production*

activity (often entrusted to the users themselves, who thus become “prosumers”), a remunerative data *extraction* activity, made possible and ubiquitous both by the traceability of users’ *online* activities, and by the multiplication of sensors able to record the activities of subjects within the *offline* world. This extraction of resources (variously called “(big) data capitalism”, “algorithmic capitalism”, “surveillance capitalism”, or even “neo-colonialism”) generates a cultural revolution that makes social subjects, their behaviors both online and offline and their mutual relationships (or rather, the traces of all this), a new type of merchandise.

On the other hand, data capitalism and the development of the digital platforms that constitute its main tool, are based on the connection of different and multiple economic circuits that were previously less directly interconnected. First of all, digital platforms seek to attract and manage an economy of time and attention of their consumers, and contribute to determine the trends of their reputational economy: in this way they influence the lives of individuals often in a decisive way with regard to their self-image and self-esteem. Secondly, platforms influence the labor economy, including by increasing a *gig economy* based on precariousness and new forms of exploitation. Finally, the data economy involves new forms of surveillance that can easily slip from the field of media entertainment and hyper-profiling advertising, to that of social and political control (think for example of biometric identification technologies, common to the media as security and control equipment). New geopolitical games are being played on the issue of data possession and control, with the North American bloc connecting with the Chinese bloc and holding Europe (and other parts of the globe) in a dangerous technological, economic and cultural grip.

Transformation of practices and the idea of communication

Among the most important (and least visible) consequences of these changes is a questioning of the concept and practices of *communication*. The problem arises from the fact that, as mentioned above, platforms use social relationships to engage their users, and thus capture their attention and the data of their behaviors. As a result, social interaction is re-engineered, redesigned in order to maximize users’ investments of time, attention, emotions, and online actions.

Hence a series of phenomena from which the main evidence can be indicated. First, the construction by the algorithms of “time spheres” and “cognitive and emotional cages” in charge of organizing information and *touch points* for users; these “bubbles” of communication lead them to live online in homogeneous worlds that develop interests and attitudes in real time which are well tuned within them but, at the same time, different and sometimes irreconcilable with each other. In this way there are no common spaces for dialogue, and the same techniques of confrontation, understanding and negotiation between different positions enter into a shadow zone. Secondly, and consequently, this situation fuels the spread of *hate speech*, of online hatred; as well as of those particular contaminations between information, serial fiction and role-playing games that produce cases of disinformation, misinformation and post-truth. Finally, the connatural immersiveness of the “metaverse” of the platforms forces other forms of both direct and mediated

communication into marginal and residual positions: for example, today there is a worrying decline in the learning of reading processes, precisely in the formative years in which this learning produces greater fruits for the maturation of attentive, cognitive, emotional and empathic skills.

These transformations in communication processes lead us first to wonder whether our idea of communication is sufficiently up-to-date to grasp the extent of these changes. In this direction, for example, many observers propose to shift the center of gravity of the concept of communication, from the passage of information to the transformation and mutual conformation between the subjects involved.

The media ecosystem as a place of active citizenship.

The realism of such a view must not be confused with possible determinism or pessimism. Although it tends to appear as a “naturalized” environment, the media ecosystem is a human construction subject to design to be revealed and dynamics to be oriented or reoriented. The most appropriate attitude is therefore not that of flight or rejection but rather that of reactive and proactive commitment: the City of Man today presents itself as an infosphere and a metaverse, and it is within it that it is necessary to live and operate.

Three areas of similar commitment

A first area concerns the political, economic and legal structural interventions entrusted to governments and other national and supranational policy-making bodies. In this area, it must be made clear that today some large economic flows guide all others (including material, environmental and financial ones): the economy of time, attention, reputation; the information economy; and the data economy. These flows must therefore be subject to particularly accurate regulation and control, ensuring both their transparency and accountability, and the fair distribution and redistribution of their resources and those they generate. Just think of how quality information requires careful public scrutiny of private initiatives, expressed in the assurance of certain rights, the financing of certain initiatives and the regulation of potentially harmful practices. In this regard, the European model must certainly be defended and encouraged. Detaching itself from the American and Chinese models, it provides for targeted state and interstate intervention in the markets in order to defend certain principles such as individual privacy, the blocking of *fake news*, the payment of taxes by technology companies, the transparency and *accountability* of the algorithms used by platforms, etc.

A second area of intervention and commitment concerns the culture of communication that we intend to live and make live. On this point it is necessary to reverse a current trend, which adopts as a communication model the one proposed by the media platforms. Rather, it is necessary to recover an idea of communication based on *existence* rather than on *functioning*; on the richness and complexity of interhuman relationality, which cannot be replicated or implemented through the

relationships between men and machines; on the full recognition (and, before that, on active research) of otherness. Educational institutions are undoubtedly strategic places for the promotion of this idea of communication: in this regard, the issue of digital training must be rethought in the broader context of the global educational emergency, a mirror and a tool for perpetuating all the main inequalities of our time and of our planet.

Finally, a third area of active presence in the contemporary media ecosystem is that of contemporary religious and spiritual experience. Although the logic of this ecosystem pushes towards “horizontal” forms of relationship, it is also true that some forms of formative communication, and in particular the transmission of the Christian *kerygma*, must also preserve on the Net a “verticality” between those who teach and those who learn, in order to rediscover a sense of “magisteriality”. In this perspective, it would be necessary to examine how the different religious communities have organized their online presence (also starting from the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic); what relationships they have established with the imposed constraints of the platforms; what opportunities of magisterium but also of encounter and service have been established (also through the construction of “bottom-up” platforms of information, relationship and mobilization); and, in general, how the new context of the platform society is promoting, transforming, homologating or extinguishing the different forms of spiritual experience.

[1] Francis, Christmas Greetings to the Roman Curia, 21 December 2019.