Jose Thayil, Andreas Vonach (eds.)

Democracy in an Age of Globalization
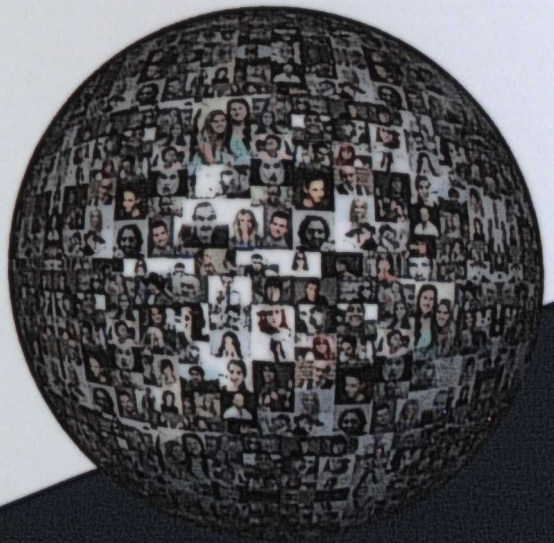
„Living Communicating" in the midst of total/totalitarian Communication

An anthropological-theological challenge

Matthias Scharer

Department for Practical Theology, Innsbruck / Austria

When we speak about "Democracy in an Age of Globalization: Ethical and Religio-Political Challenges" as we do at this symposium, communication gets our special attention. On the one hand we are able to recognize how enormous communication is challenging in itself; on the other hand communication is a key cause and resource of Globalization. Furthermore, democracy is largely dependent on communication.

Sociology uses the term "Knowledge-Based[1] Communication Society"[2] when they characterise our postmodern society, but what does communication mean in a knowledge-based communication society?

1 Is the traditional meaning of Communication sufficient in a Knowledge-Based Communication Society?

Breuer used a well-known formal description of communication in his pragmatic Theory of Text. Many other authors, including theologians[3], have also utilised this description:

- Which person is, or rather which social groups are in operation?
- At which point in time

---

[1]   The term "Knowledge-Based Society" is used as a prominent category in the discussion on the future of industrial societies. The concept of Knowledge-Based Society is very successful. It belongs to political, economic, scientific and mass-media discourses. Alongside work and capital knowledge is the third resource which seems to be irreplaceable with the help of the new information technologies. The European Union connect Knowledge-Based Society with the category of "Life-Long-Learning". This combination should make Europeans winners in the international economic concurrences. See Bergsdorf (2006); Bittlingmayer et al. (Ed.) (2006); Liessmann (2011).

[2]   The term „Communication Society" belongs to the performance of electronic information medias like Web 2.0. See Münch (1991); Münch (1995); Gates (³1995); Klenk – Pross (1998); Schnider (2001).

[3]   See Arens (2007).

- With which (rows of) symbols
- In which kinds of intentions
- Under which medial conditions
- Considering which person or social group
- And what's the effect?[4]

Does this description of communication extend far enough when we connect democracy – communication – globalization considering their ethical and religio-political challenges? Are the explanations for communication, which derive from textual theories, sufficient for today's understanding of communication? My personal point of view is that the changes in communication specifically touch upon the following elements of the traditional definition:

- The (rows of) symbols: They are replaced by medial sheets to the greatest possible extent.
- The intentions: Traditionally intention was connected to the understanding of „Communicative Acting" designed by the well-known German philosopher J. Habermas[5]. Habermas and with him many other philosophers and theologians[6] state agreement, which is enabled by a discourse without rule, to be the general intention of human communication. Does this ideal formulated intention really reach globalised communication?
- The medial conditions: Are they still only conditions of communication just like the spoken or written word or does new media change the basic understanding of communication?
- The effect: How is the effect of communication changing in a technically controlled globalised world of communication?

In an article, Apel cites Botho Strauß, who called the word „Kommunikation" the ugliest word of the epoch: „the wide variety of our emotions and intentions fall victim to the tediousness and monotony of a socio-technical abbreviated word." Strauß regards the word communication as a „brutal garbage disposal word"[7] that reflects a reductionistic image of humanity.

At the same time, the taboo word "communication" wins – especially in its technological nature and importance for democracies. Hardly any social movement in the last century has been influenced so much by communication through new media as the so-called "green" movement in Iran or the democracy movement in Egypt. Internet, Twitter, and

---

[4]   See Breuer (1974) 35.
[5]   See Habermas (1981).
[6]   See Peukert (1976).
[7]   Apel (2005).

YouTube connected the countries to the rest of the world and have become non-violent weapons of resistance. Thus, the new communication media were used by both persecutors and persecuted in the same way. Also the nationalistic scene in Central Europe uses technical communication media to endanger the basis of democracy. As a result, the bridge between communication media and democracy is ambivalent.

2 Epochal Change in Communication

As explained above, the spoken and written word and the language of the body are no longer the sole media of communication. The panoply of communication media is continuously expanding. The opportunities for communication and the quantity of information exchanged are caught up in a process of rapid change.

2.1 Placeless Society

We are heading towards the „placeless society" prophesised the british futurologist William Knoke in his book "Bold New World"[8]. Space and time don't play a significant role: the networking of information becomes the new navel of the world. In the twenty-first century, national states, companies, trade unions in their old form are dissolved. This is similarly experienced by schools, religions, and families. Distances will count for nothing: with a mere click of a mouse, information can be sent or received, merchandise can be ordered, and electronic banking transactions can be carried out. Small enterprises around the world join together, amoeba-like, to offer services now performed by big businesses. A great deal of work is no longer undertaken on company premises; instead it is carried out on private, mobile computers connected to a central office. Education too is transformed. Instead of children and young people having to go to school to obtain information, information comes to children and young people. It could be that in the future the figure of a teacher will take a mythical stature. The big losers in all of this are those who cannot enter global communication in time; the so-called media illiterate and digital immigrants.

The development in the direction of a global, virtual communication-oriented society necessarily leads to transformation of people's identity. Those having access to communication media enjoy a boundless freedom to communicate with those sharing their interests. This freedom, however, has its price: face-to-face personal encounter gives place to faceless exchange of information in an illusory community.

---

[8]   See Knoke (1966).

2.2 The challenge of Effective Communication

In conjunction with the increasingly economy-driven and media-oriented modern world, in-
terest in effective interpersonal communication is on the rise. „How can we communicate
successfully?" is the question raised by communication trainer Jerry Richardson in his intro-
duction to the NLP (Neuro-Linguistic-Programming) method.[9] If you master the NLP tech-
niques you will be in a position to:

- Take control of any situation immediately...
- Establish trust and credibility ...
- Use the power of suggestion to get what you want...
- Present your proposals in ways that are virtually irresistible...
- Overcome resistance effortlessly and effectively...
- Get people to agree with you...
- Get other people to clearly understand you...
- Avoid being manipulated.

With the intention of expediting interpersonal communication, Richardson and others like
him appeal to "the recent advances in the state of the communicative and the persuasive arts,"
which include "discoveries in such varied fields as hypnosis, cabernetics, linguistics, psycho-
logy and psychiatry, and sales and management communication" (...) Richardson states his
goals as follows: "In seeking solutions to communication problems, we prefer what works".[10]

2.3 Total/Totalitarian Communication?

In the ambivalence of the late-modern communication context, a distinction can be helpful,
namely between relativity and absoluteness of human communication. The hope is that, in the
global virtual communication space, the liberation of mankind from conditional religious con-
flicts happens and leads to one world and a trans-cultural domination-free communication.
However, this got proven precariously after Nine-Eleven: On the one hand those economic
and cultural areas of the North, which stimulate the hope of limitless communication, simul-
taneously aggressively eliminate the "unconnected" from their fair share through exploitation
of the world's resources and keeps them as a virtual illiterate. On the other hand terrorist syst-
ems use the virtual space extensively to operate worldwide.

---

[9]   See Richardson (1987).
[10]   Richardson (1987) 5.

If one considers the context of late-modern communication with its promises of hope and its potential support of violence, the pseudo religious character of the relevant experience of the world becomes clear. At the same time precarious alliances between religious content and strategic interests appear. Just because the experience of churches and religions in the eyes of many people is still relatively stable in terms of identity and roles, norms and values, consequently a "stable" communication context seems to lie, recognizing and looking for people who have recently become dispassionate towards the churches and religious communities in other areas and therefore exploit this potential for their own purposes. Economic and management concepts are exploiting the religious experience without taking the challenge of the Christian message or the claim of another religion in terms of a global social justice. The "small gods" communicate efficiently manufacturable, comprehensively, and boundlessly to displace the hope for the coming of the "great God". In the late-modern communication context, this is theologically speaking about the battle between "small gods", who satisfy the fast communication needs, and that all God who "dries all tears beyond self-sustaining, effective or ineffective communication" and opens up the prospect of meeting and relationship. It concerns the struggle between the promising infinite freedom communication possibilities of the worldwide network and a God who shares with all people – in particular the communicators excluded from, and calls them jointly in the freedom of the "children of God".

3 Churches and Religions are involved in the Knowledge-based Communication Society

Churches, religions and their theologies can neither escape the globalization of communication nor the trend towards more effective communication. A survey of formation programs used by the churches shows clearly how complex and diverse the attempts are, which seek to „get a better grip" on the sphere of communication.

3.1 "Tips and Tricks"

The more globalized communication becomes, the more difficult are the communication problems that surface in the parish or in school, and the greater will be the desire for recipes and easy-to-learn "tips and tricks". By no means do I mean to minimize efforts to teach more effective communication techniques. Nor is my intention to revile the enormous technological developments in the direction of digitalized communication. It is precisely in view of such development, which people will be unable to escape in the future, that church practice needs to

question theological criteria for communication. Before we do this I will try to emphasize some previously unreflected options in church communication.

3.2 The Non-Profit-Option

Thinking in market terms, one might choose to apply to the churches the criteria for success designed for a „non-profit" enterprise. Obviously, the success of the church's mission cannot be measured, as in industry, by the hard facts of maximizing profit, among other factors. But the soft facts, such as effective communication, client satisfaction, high attendance rate at church events, and so on, must balance out.

It is astonishing to which extent otherwise conservative church personnel are naively jumping onto the data highway to transmit faith-related content. Under the mantle of modern media, however, lurks the same old instrumentalist approach to language. Such communication fails to "take hold" not merely because it blocks out the emotional aspect but also because it does not fit with the „object" of faith that is meant to be communicated. Numerous biblical examples show how the form of the encounter becomes itself content: Jesus' glance alone was enough to make the denying Peter understand what was happening (Luke 22:61a); Mary needed only to greet Elizabeth and already „the baby leapt in her womb" (Luke 1:41); both women knew immediately what that meant.

3.3 Faith Communication without borders?

Do church leaders really give enough thought to the effects of media forms of communication on the relational quality of the Christian message? Do they sufficiently take into account the randomness of access to such communication? Can the fundamental Christian message effectively be transmitted in a communication system that apparently knows no borders, a system into which information can be added or modified at will, a system open to anyone and everyone, but demanding no personal commitment and allowing one to exit at will?

3.4 The Meeting-and-Relationship Option

The alternative to the Non-Profit-Option is an approach that gives priority to interpersonal encounter, which is not simply the product of communication techniques and use of media. Is this not the course for the future?

The Pope himself invites youth to approach YouCat[11] with passion and perservance, to "remain in dialogue" with the faith by speaking with friends, forming study networks and exchanging ideas on the internet. It seems that even the Pope forgot that not every object of faith is accessible to everyone at every given time. The transmission of faith needs the intimate space of encounter in family, group, or community. The church's awareness of these facts, however, seems now to be diminishing, though at the beginning of church history it played a leading role. One can well ask if the churches, through their use of mass communication, have not in fact fostered the typically postmodern noncommittal reception of faith.

4 How can we come to criteria?

Communication is a keyword in postmodern society as well as in Communicative Theology (CT). Some of you are already aware that a group of theologians in our Faculty is working on CT in a special research-cluster of one of the research centres at the University of Innsbruck. This is entitled: „Politics-Religion-Art – Platform for Science in Conflict and Communication. Communicative theologizing in Innsbruck is carried out in close cooperation with other theologians throughout Europe and America, including with the Institute for Systematic and Ecumenical Theology in Tübingen (Bernd Jochen Hilberath), the Institute of Systematic-Theology at Fordham University, New York (Bradford Hinze) and Boston College (Mary Ann Hinsdale).

4.1 Some aspects to take into account when practicing Communicative Theology and Theme-centered Interaction

If we consider the scheme of Communicative Theology, which Teresa Peter, Christoph Drexler and myself previously presented in this forum in Pune[12], we can see that the Figure includes three dimensions comparable to a moving triangle: (1) personal experience of life and faith (Ruth Cohn speaks in TCI from "I"); (2) experience of (ecclesial) community (in TCI we use "We" for this factor or dimension); (3) biblical testimony in living transmission in dialogue[13] with other religious traditions (this is the "It" in TCI). All three dimensions or factors are within a process, each having its own specific communicative character.
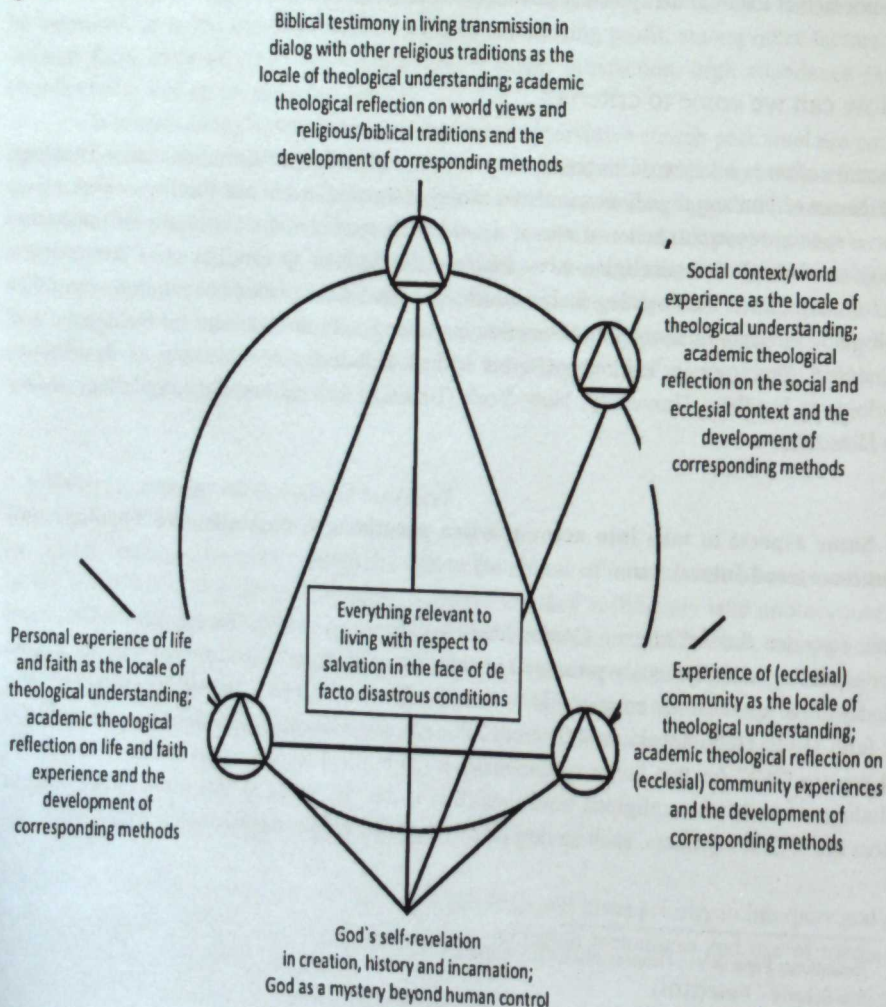
---

[11] Benedictus Papa, XVI.; Österreichische Bischofskonferenz (2011).
[12] See Scharer – Peter (2005).
[13] Unlike to the following figure we changed the "it" with "in dialogue with".

The triangle is surrounded by a circle. The circle represents "social context/world understanding". If we speak about communication in a knowledge-based globalized communication society, communication is not only an important factor of the I, We, It. Communication is an aspect of the globe, the "social context/world experience", with an enormous impact on the ethical and religio-political challenges of democracy in an age of globalization. Ruth C. Cohn previously asserted: "If you don't attend to the globe, you will be devoured by it." The specific communicative character even of the It, the Biblical testimony in living transmission in dialogue with other religious traditions, is affected by the communication globe.

Biblical testimony in living transmission in dialog with other religious traditions as the locale of theological understanding; academic theological reflection on world views and religious/biblical traditions and the development of corresponding methods

Social context/world experience as the locale of theological understanding; academic theological reflection on the social and ecclesial context and the development of corresponding methods

Everything relevant to living with respect to salvation in the face of de facto disastrous conditions

Personal experience of life and faith as the locale of theological understanding; academic theological reflection on life and faith experience and the development of corresponding methods

Experience of (ecclesial) community as the locale of theological understanding; academic theological reflection on (ecclesial) community experiences and the development of corresponding methods

God's self-revelation in creation, history and incarnation; God as a mystery beyond human control

4.2 The loci of theological understanding

CT takes up Melchior Cano's (1509-1560) notion of the "loci theologici". In CT the dimensions are "as the local of theological understanding". "A central point of the 'loci theologici' tradition is likewise held to be central by Communicative Theology. It is this claim that theological knowledge cannot be based on a single source, but rather calls for setting diverse sources in relation to each other. These expansions, however, are governed by the insight that God's self-revelation is always greater than ... every concretization in a particular 'place' of theological knowledge. Thus, lines are introduced, which go out from the central mystery of God and his self-revelation, so as to touch and go beyond all four dimensions ... ."[14]

Communicative Theology works manifests itself in the cross-linking of the four dimensions shown in the diagram. It means bringing together the four dimensions of doing Communicative Theology in such way that they work out reciprocally as challenges, provocations and criteria for gaining theological insight. Only as a whole and not separated from each other do they enable us to gain an insight into God's mystery "from the center" that takes a concrete form in the signs of the Kingdom of God. The small triangles in the sphere on every corner of the large triangle and also in the large sphere remind us of the cross-linking of the four dimensions.

4.3 Levels and dimensions of CT

The way in which Communicative Theology works manifests itself is not only found in the horizontal linking of the 4 dimensions, but also in the vertical linking of the dimensions. The vertical linking of the three levels of CT is based on the observation that, according to the traditional understanding of science, the levels of experience and ones of reflection are strictly separated and the level of direct involvement is hardly ever taken into account. Parallel to this separation is the splitting of roles among practitioners, on the one hand, and academic researchers on the other. Communicative Theology aims to overcome this separation: precisely by appreciating the interconnectedness of all three levels in their interaction, it looks for and finds theological insights.

---

[14] Communicative Theology Research Group (2007) 85.

5 „Living Communicating" – Criteria for Communication in the midst of total/totalitarian Communication?

What relevance has a reflection from the perspective of CT and TCI on knowledge-based globalized communication society, church and religions? I will summarise with some proposals and criteria.

(1) Ruth C. Cohn, founder of TCI, distinguishes between "Dead Learning" and "Living Learning". What is the difference? Dead Learning is characterised by absolute one of the four aspects of the triangle in the circle, mostly the "It". Living Learning regards all four factors/dimensions as equally important and involved in differentiating interaction. The same is true for the distinction of living and dead communication: the transfer of huge amounts of unstructured data without reference to the individual and his or her community cannot be described as Living Communication, which is inserted in life.

(2) The attention to the dynamic balance of the triangle in the circle doesn't automatically guarantee Living Communicating. Even TCI could work like a "match in a haystack" if you don't pay attention to anthropological, ethical and political axioms such as: Every human person is autonomous and interdependent. Respect is due to all living beings and their growth. Free decisions take place within certain inner and outer borders; expansion of borders is possible. Techniques for "Living Communicating" without anthropological, ethical und political axioms could work against its original intention.

(3) If we deepen the TCI-model of communication to take account of God's self-revelation, His unbounded freedom and His abiding mystery, as we do in CT, this leads to additional criteria. Globalized Communication as a main aspect of social context and world experience becomes an important "Sign of the Time" that we have to seriously take into account, according to Gaudium et Spes. From this point of view we can't understand the Gospel without interpreting and differentiating globalized communication. Its ambivalence, its tendency to a totalitarian character of communication like a "small God" contradicts God's mystery as well as God's absolutely free self-revelation in creation, history and incarnation. The dictum of our Dean Józéf Niewiadomski, "extra media nulla salus" in reference to "extra ekklesia nulla salus" makes us aware that a religious force may be replaced through a media force. It could be that the secular force with its technical possibilities is much more sublime and therefore dangerous.

(4) CT gives us the possibility to link not only the dimensions but also the levels. As scientists we are involved in globalized communication every day.

(5) The level of immediate involvement touches us emotionally through globalized communication.

(6) The level of experience and interpretation leads us from the immediate experience of involvement in communication to the interpreted experience, in which the immediate

experience of being involved in a communication process is implicitly and explicitly evaluated and assigned an anthropological or theological meaning.

(7) The level of scientific reflection has the function of analysing the methodically guided communication processes and of evaluating such processes as loci where academic theological insight is made real. This level builds reflectively upon the level of interpreted experience, which in turn builds upon the level of immediate involvement.

References

Apel, Friedmar (2005) *Der kodierte Mensch. Das Unwort des Zeitalters*, in: FAZ 33 vom 9. Feb. 2005, Nr. 2).

Arens, Edmund (2007) *Gottesverständigung. Eine kommunikative Religionstheologie*. Freiburg i. Br.: Herder.

Benedictus Papa, XVI. (2011) *YouCat*. Ed. by Österreichische Bibschofskonferenz. München: Pattloch.

Bergsdorf, Wolfgang (2006) *Herausforderungen der Wissensgesellschaft*. Themen & Kontroversen. München: Olzog.

Bittlingmayer, Uwe H. – Bauer, Ullrich (Hg.) (2006) *Die „Wissensgesellschaft". Mythos, Ideologie oder Realität?* Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

Breuer, Dieter (1974) *Einführung in die pragmatische Texttheorie*. München: Fink.

Communicative Theology Research Group (2007) *Communicative Theology: Reflections on the Culture of Our Practice of Theology* (Communikative Theology – Interdisciplinary Studies, 1/1). Wien: Lit.

Gates, Bill (³1995) *Der Weg nach vorn. Die Zukunft der Informationsgesellschaft*. Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe.

Habermas, Jürgen (1981) *Theorie kommunikativen Handelns*, 2 Bde. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.

Klenk, Dominik – Pross, Harry (1998) *„Gegenwartsverlust" in der Kommunikationsgesellschaft. Anstöße zu einer dialogischen Ethik der (Massen)Kommunikation mit Martin Buber und zwei Gespräche mit Harry Pross*. Münster: Lit.

Knoke, William (1966) *Bold New World: The Essential Road Map to the Twenty-first Century*. New York.

Liessmann, Konrad Paul (⁵2011) *Theorie der Unbildung. Die Irrtümer der Wissensgesellschaft*. München: Piper.

Münch, Richard (1991) *Dialektik der Kommunikationsgesellschaft*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Münch, Richard (1995): *Dynamik der Kommunikationsgesellschaft*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Peukert, Helmut (1976) *Wissenschaftstheorie – Handlungstheorie – Fundamentale Theologie. Analysen zu Ansatz und Status theologischer Theoriebildung*. Düsseldorf: Patmos.

Richardson, Jerry (1987) *The Magic of Rapport: How You Can Gain Personal Power in Any Situation*. California: Cupertino.

Scharer, Matthias – Peter, Teresa (2005) *Towards a Communicative Theology*, in: Jnanadeepa: Pune Journal of Religious Studies 8 (1), 108–126.

Schnider, Tanja (2001) *Paradoxa in der Entwicklung der Kommunikationsgesellschaft. Warum durch qualitative Defizite von Interaktivität und Körperlichkeit in den gesellschaftlichen Kommunikationsstrukturen trotz oder gerade wegen globaler informationstechnischer Vernetzung und massenmedialer Diskurse kein kommunikativ reicheres Leben erzielt wird*. Frankfurt am Main – New York: Peter Lang.