**African Digital Faith Influencer (ADFI) Certificate Program**

**Module #1: Method and skills for Digital Presence in the Light of the Teaching of Pope Francis (*Christus Vivit*)**

**Week #3: Digital Media Landscape and Ethical Influencing in Africa**

**Rev Dr Augustine Obi**

(Lecturer: Melbourne School of Continental Philosophy, Australia; and E-Facilitator, National Open University, Nigeria)

In the first week of our engagement, Dr Ruffini exposed us to the fundamental role the digital culture plays in the evangelising mission of the church, and how our robust and visionary engagement with the same should be premised on the church’s teaching on our openness to God’s love in truth, and our exercise of this logic of love for the construction of our human society (Benedict XVI 2009).

In the second iteration, Dr Tim Hogan described the overbearing effect of digital culture on our ‘real-world’ culture, with his thinking broadly centring on how the new media has transformed into an unruly, uncontrollable, and sometimes ugly echo chamber of experiences that hold us in its thrall. Taking this ‘cultural hurricane’ into consideration, Tim made a convincing case that “[i]f we are going to show up in the digital world as missionaries…we are going to need a nervous system that is skilled at using this technology to help us to become the unique people God has created us to be.”

After going through Tim’s lecture last week, I could not but agree with Eric Schmidt, the former Google CEO, who once remarked that “the internet is the largest experiment in anarchy that we have ever had.” It is beyond doubt that the ubiquity of digital culture has gained wider acceptability and usability and has probably made it to assume the most important communication tools in our age. With its speed and reach, ease of use and capacity for networking and information sharing, digital media has metamorphosed into a phenomenon that has revolutionized the way we communicate and socialise.

Despite its prevailing positives, the problem is that digital media can often take a negative trajectory -completely resulting in unpleasant outcomes. For instance, digital media’s promotion of pseudonymity, cyberbullying, criminal activities, fragmental information, fake news, spread of sensationalism, xenophobia, hate speech, and threats to national security, portrays the cyber space as a sphere of instrumentalization (Pheasant, 2017). To put it in another way, although digital media has made huge impact on the world in unprecedented ways, it tends to have ulterior ends which belie its force for good in inaugurating a space for expression, connection, community, and creativity (Bhanye, 2023).

The continent of Africa has been vulnerable to digital media’s ineluctable maze and instrumentalising effects. And this begs the question: how can African digital missionaries who are imbued with the evangelising mission of the church, engage the African digital landscape in an ethical manner or a ‘zone of significance’ that offers an imagination of faith that is committed to the common good (Johnson, 2015)? Here lies the crux of this week’s lecture: given that digital media has become a credible vehicle for evangelisation, African digital missionaries must provide a counter narrative that serves as correctives to the instrumentalising effects of the digital culture.

-In addressing this challenge, this week’s lecture will first analyse briefly the African digital landscape to illustrate how African communities are not only being remodelled by the innovativeness and diversity of the digital media but also are entirely enveloped by it.

-Second, the lecture will provide a critique of digital media inspired by and as revealed in selected African songs, particularly Zimdancehall songs from Zimbabwe that illustrate the problems that are occasioned by social media in our society and how it might be reimagined to reflect Gospel values.

-To get an idea of what an application of ethical influencing might resemble, the lecture will discuss Habermas’ Theory of Communicative Action and Pope Benedict XVI’s perspective on media and digital culture.

-Lastly, the lecture will further illuminate ethical influencing in Africa by highlighting the several distinctive features of Ubuntu (the homogenous concept of African humanism) which make the concept ‘a go to’ normative paradigm for African Digital Missionaries.

**AFRICAN DIGITAL LANDSCAPE**

Digital media has become one of the defining elements of our modern world. As Habermas highlights in his theory of communicative action, this emerging technology has situated itself in Africa as the public sphere for interaction and relationships where critical dialogue and opinion formation are developed (Pheasant, 2017). Social media use in Africa has increased exponentially to over 384 million since the past two decades. As Galal (2022) reveals in “*Social media in Africa – statistics and facts,*” as of February 2022, about 56% of the population in Northern Africa used social media, while the share was 45% in Southern Africa (Galal, 2022). With a meagre share of 8%, Central Africa was significantly behind. Regarding social media use, the research reported that as recent as 2022, users in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa preferred WhatsApp to other platforms, while Egyptian and Moroccan users priced Facebook above other platforms (Galal, 2022).

As all members of Building Bridges of Faith Initiative can resoundingly testify, it is obvious that digital media has bridged the barriers of not only communication but faith as well (Boyd 2007; Sefton3Green & Buckingham 1996). Not minding the cost of technological devices, data charges and poor power supply, social media usage in Africa has become a necessity and no longer considered as living a lap of luxury. Various social media platforms represent, for the young people in Africa, a powerful instrument or platform for Africans to tell their stories, do business, engage in fast and efficient communication, connection (networking), social and political engagements (Bhanye, 2023).

Recognising the critical role that digital media plays in the evangelising mission of the church, Pope Francis participated in a digital/virtual synodal conversation with African Catholic university students on All Saints Day, 2022. Building Bridges Initiative (BBI) emerged after this historic online continental synodal dialogue with Pope Francis, and since then the initiative has expanded from initial seven-African member countries to over fifty countries in Africa.

As the current coordinator of BBI, I cannot speak highly enough of the power and significance of digital media in driving the widespread and systematic mission of BBI, with several member-countries deploying the different platforms provided by digital media to communicate, share resources, leverage connection, and create mentorship.

Digital media platforms also provide opportunities for African content creators to develop continent-specific stories about Africa. As Bridget Boakye captures it, “these inspiring creatives are resetting the African narrative and giving voice to a new way for Africans and the world to think about Africa. Clearly, there are indications that diverse and often optimistic stories of Africa told through new media platforms have tangible benefits on African lives (Boakye, 2021).

**Critique of African Digital Landscape**

Despite its many benefits, as Schmidt, the former CEO of google puts it, by its very nature, the internet is also anarchic by nature, and this has rolled down to social platforms too.” In other words, as aptly stated in the year 2000 document of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, the Internet “conquers barriers of distance and isolation, bringing learning opportunities to villagers in remote areas, cloistered religious, the home-bound, prisoners, and many others” (PCSC 2000, no. 10), and at the same time, it “raises concerns about some of the radically new consequences it brings: a loss of the intrinsic value of items of information, an undifferentiated uniformity in messages that are reduced to pure information, a lack of responsible feedback and a certain discouragement of interpersonal relationships” (no. 24). All these adverse effects of digital media, as Pheasant claims, hinge on “incoherence in the performance of the self and the creation of false or anonymous identities to achieve strategic ends” (Pheasant, 2017). Thus, as the 2000 document of the Pontifical Council For Social Communications reveals, the challenge is to discern whether digital media “will be committed to the common good, and whether the web of the future, instead of representing a global community, could become a network of isolated individuals (no. 29)”.

While it is clear that social media has brought numerous benefits, it has also brought significant pitfalls to the continent of Africa. These pitfalls range from digital culture’s addictive nature, its capacity to create antisocial generation, erosion of African value system, spread of sensationalism, hate speech, false information, threat to national security, promotion of cyber-bullying, and creation of platforms for criminal activities.

The attention of these pitfall of digital culture has been attracted to some Zimbabwean musicians who have been using their music to express their discontent with this undesirable effects of the digital culture. To understand what is at stake, it is relevant to reveal a raft of songs composed by Zimbabwean musicians like Freeman, King Shady, Nox, Juntal and Stunner, to see how they characterised social media as a platform that is fraught with dangers.

In one of his songs, King Shaddy called out people who are obsessed with their WhatsApp platform especially those who take photos of accident victims in their pool of blood. Shaddy sings *Ringava bhazi raita accident panekuti abatsire ocapture video*. [If the bus that has been involved in an accident, instead of helping you capture a video]. Reflecting on Shaddy’s songs, Raphael Nhongo, Baba P. Tshotsho, Tendai F. Muringa suggest that:

The concern by the singer is not new as we, on our day-today lives, always witness incidents of accidents on WhatsApp. One then wonders where the person who will be shooting such photos and videos will be. It also boggles one’s mind of how the people who will be taking such videos at accident scenes will be feeling about those who will be involved in the accident. Instead of helping the accident victims, those social-media users who lack Ubuntu will get there and start capturing photos and videos. At times, some victims might be having a chance to survive but end up passing away because those who arrive there first do not help them but just get interested in capturing the incident so that they can share on WhatsApp (Nhongo et al, 2021).

Further, in his song titled *WhatsApp*, Nox also exposes the rate at which social media incites jealousy in a marriage. As he puts it, *Foni yako yarira ndinoda kuziva ini akufonerandiyaniko? Akusendera message ndiyaniko aita unyemwerere? Maawa four shuwa here uchichata PaWhatsApp nepaFacebook Hanzi babe chimbomira ndipindure chat, kusvika usiku ndakangomirira*. [Your phone rang I want to know who is calling you Who sent you a message that has made you to smile? You have spent four hours chatting on WhatsApp and Facebook Whilst you ask me to wait until you reply to chats until its evening whilst I am waiting].

In the lyrics of the song above, Nox describes WhatsApp as one of the major causes of extramarital affairs. In the song, the husband is querying the wife for spending time on WhatsApp and Facebook. Also, he requires the wife to explain while she is smiling when receiving a message on her phone. As Nhongo et al observes, Nox’s song on WhatsApp demonstrates “that when digitally mediated sociality takes precedence over face-to-face interaction, it becomes problematic in a marriage union” (Nhongo et al, 2021).

Additionally, in their song, *I’m letting you go,* Stunner and Nox also bemoan the antisocial roles of the digital culture. In *asi dai wadeleter mamessage Nemapic andaikusendera, Netumwe tumasin twandaikutumira murudo …* [I am letting you go but you should delete all the messages And the pictures that I used to send you And the other stuff that I used to send you whilst we were still in love], the artistes paint a picture of people, who, when they are still together they are happy together even to the extent of taking private nude images of themselves. However, when the relationship goes pare-shaped, one of the partners may decide to inflict pain on the other by sharing those private nude images on social media. In these songs, Stunner and Nox challenged the sociality of social media, especially when, it can be deplored as a “means to divide people and set them apart in as much as it connects and bring them closer together” (Nhongo et al, 2021).

**So, given the above-mentioned inherent pitfalls of digital media, how then can African digital missionaries ethically influence the African digital landscape?**

Dr Tim answered this question by exploring how digital missionaries can maintain an “empathetic sensitivity” in their digital engagement. In the next section of our conversation, we are going to explore Habermas’ Theory of Communicative Action and Benedict XVI’s perspective on media and digital culture to see what ethical influencing should be for every digital missionary.

**HABERMAS’ THEORY OF COMMUICATIVE ACTION**

In his Theory of Communicative Action, the German philosopher, Jurgen Habermas suggests that given that public discourse can be vulnerable to the instrumentalising effects of the digital world, all participants engaged in discourse especially moral dialogue should endeavour to arrive at a consensus. Habermas explores the way individuals communicate in accordance with the opinion of others, and takes unilateral decisions without taking into consideration the consequences of their decisions on the society (Habermas, 1984).

For Habermas, ultimately, the theory of communication requires people to say the truth in order not to create a ‘modal confusion.’ He argues that an action is considered communicative when participants in a discourse communicate in line with the ‘objective,’ ‘social,’ and ‘subjective’ worlds. In doing so, they get to know one another through deliberations, argument, cooperation and by sharing their subjective experiences, desires, and feelings. In their reaction to Habermas’ Theory of Communicative Action, Cecez-Kecmanovic and Janson, suggest that:

Communicative action exemplifies the concept of communicative rationality inherent in human speech, which denotes a communicative practice characterised by actors’ obligation to give reason for or against validity claims raised, to challenge, accept or reject claims of others on the bases of the better argument (Cecez-Kecmanovic and Janson,1999, p. 186)

From the above clarification, it is obvious that Habermas’ Theory of Communicative Action frowns at individuals who would rather swallow ideas hook, line and sinker, instead of applying sound argument and logical reasoning in verifying ideas or any piece of information to ascertain their validity claims. Another essential element of Habermas’ Theory of Communicative Action is that if anyone wants to act communicatively, the person must endeavour to raise validity claims. What this means is that the speaker who wants to communicate must utter something comprehensible, a true proposition, and he/she must express his/her intension truthfully in such a way that the audience or hearers can trust the speaker, and choosing an utterance that is right, the hearer can accept the utterance with respect to an already recognised normative background.

In his Theory of Communicative Action Habermas not only believes that through rational argumentation a just society can be created and sustained, but he also endeavours to find a middle ground between totalitarian closure and relativism, to exemplify why ethical influencing is still a possibility, and for him, a “public” discourse of rationally-grounded argumentative speech-or communicative action-is the answer.

**BENEDICT XVI’S PERSPECTIVE ON MEDIA AND DIGITAL CULTURE**

Having considered Habermas’ Theory of Communicative Action which obliges actors involved in digital discourse to always ensure that the statement they make is true; that the speech act is right in regards to the existing normative context, and that the manifest intention of the speaker is meant as expressed, our focus in the following section is to outline Benedict XVI’s thoughts on media and digital culture to see how they can help us to engage in serious reflection on how to influence ethically in the African digital landscape.

**DIGITAL CULTURE TO SERVE THE HUMAN BEING**

In “Encyclical Letter Caritas in Veritate,” Pope Benedict XVI, in keeping with the earlier social doctrine of the church, maintains that “technology enables us to exercise dominion over matter, to reduce risks, to save labour, to improve our conditions of life’ (Benedict XVI 2009, no. 69). Thus, conscious of the fact that any progress made in technology presents humanity with new possibilities for good, and possibilities for evil especially when our consciences are manipulated, Pope Benedict claims that “if technical progress is not matched by corresponding progress in man’s (sic) ethical formation, in man’s (sic) inner growth (cf. Eph 3:16; 2 Cor 4:16), then it is not progress at all, but a threat for man (sic) and for the world” (Benedict XVI 2007, no. 22).

Taking a critical look at how the digital world can alter human reality, Pope Benedict frowns at the pitfalls inherent in the emergence of ideologies, arguing that scientific discoveries are an opportunity for growth for all if they are used in the right way (2009, no. 14). He suggests that for digital culture to serve the human being, “it requires new eyes and a new heart, capable of rising above a materialistic vision of human events, capable of glimpsing in development the beyond that technology cannot give. By following this path, it is possible to pursue the integral human development that takes its direction from the driving force of charity in truth” (Benedict XVI 2009, no. 77).

If the role of the digital culture is to serve the human being, Pope Benedict XVI calls on digital missionaries to examine their responsibilities and rights in society, and their ultimate goals. And for him, the goal of digital missionaries will be met when all involved exercise their mission at the service of truth and promoting the dignity of individuals and peoples, justice, fraternity, charity, literacy, socialisation, democracy, dialogue, solidarity and the common good (Benedict XVI, 2008, no. 2, 2009, no. 73).

In line with Habermas’ Theory of Communicative Action which obliges actors involved in digital discourse to always ensure that the statement they make is true, Benedict XVI encourages digital missionaries involved in the digital culture to avoid settling for partial or provisional truths instead of presenting reality (Benedict XVI 2008, no. 3); they are to seek to transmit the ultimate meaning of the human person in order to contribute constructively to the propagation of all that is good and true (Benedict XVI 2006, no 2).

Further, while insisting on the importance of dialogue in communication, Benedict XVI suggests that to properly engage the digital culture, it must be used in such a way that it acquires value and meaning. And during this engagement, “it is necessary to develop an appropriate environment, a kind of ‘eco-system’ that maintains a just equilibrium between silence, words, images, and sounds” (2012).

**UBUNTU AS A NORMATIVE PARADIGM FOR AFRICAN DIGITAL INFLUENCING**

Having explored Benedict XVI’s thoughts on media and digital culture, and how African Digital Missionaries can adopt them in order to make appreciable impacts on the African Digital Landscape, I would like to add that in order for a robust and visionary influencing to take shape in Africa, it has to depend on **UBUNTU**, the homogenous theory of African humanism.

When you ask anyone on the streets of Johannesburg, Lusaka or Lilongwe (in the Southern and Eastern Africa) what they understood Ubuntu to mean, they will most properly go straight to outline the attributes of virtues to which a person in these societies is expected to aspire – such as compassion, generosity, honesty, magnanimity, empathy, understanding, forgiveness and the ability to share. Ubuntu is an African philosophical concept that captures the essence of what is means to be human (Eze, 2012).

The concept of Ubuntu is derived from the Bantu notion of being a human being. -Its root being ntu, signifies primal being. It is encapsulated in the following Bantu aphorisms, like *Motho ke motho ka batho babang; Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (a person is a person through other people). In other words, Africans are known for their belief that humanity is achieved through our relations with other human beings.

If the spirit of Ubuntu promotes care, concern, and engagement for one another, then, digital missionaries should always express humanity, concerns, sympathy, affection and authentic disclosure for news and moral literacy in all their digital engagement.

**FURTHER READINGS**

Bhanye, Johannes, Shayamunda, Ruvimbo and Chipo Tavira, Rungamai. *Social Media in the African Context: A Review Study on Benefits and Pitfalls.*

Benedict XVI. 2009. “Encyclical Letter Caritas in Veritate.” Vatican Website. Accessed 20 February 2024. [http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\_ben-xvi\_enc\_ 20090629\_caritas-in-veritate.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_%2020090629_caritas-in-veritate.html).

Benedict XVI. 2007. “Encyclical Letter Spe Salvi.” Vatican Website. Accessed 23 February 2024. http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\_ben-xvi\_enc\_ 20071130\_spe-salvi.html.

Benedict XVI. 2008. “The Media: At the Crossroads Between Self-Promotion and Service. Searching for the Truth in Order to Share It With Others. Message of the Holy Father for the 42nd World Communications.” Vatican Website. Accessed 23 February 2024. https://www. vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf\_ben-xvi\_mes\_20080124\_42nd-world-communications-day.html.

Benedict XVI. 2006. “The Media: A Network for Communication, Communion and Cooperation. Message of the Holy Father for 40th World Communications Day, 2006.” Vatican Website. Accessed 30 January 2024. https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/ messages/communications/documents/hf\_ben-xvi\_mes\_20060124\_40th-world-communications-day.html.

Benedict XVI. 2012. “Silence and Word: Path of Evangelization. Message of the Holy Father for the 46th World Communications Day.” Vatican Website. Accessed 19 July 2021. https:// www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf\_ben-xvi\_ mes\_20120124\_46th-world-communications-day.html Benedict XVI. 2012. “Silence and Word: Path of Evangelization. Message of the Holy Father for the 46th World Communications Day.” Vatican Website. Accessed 19 February 2024. https:// www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf\_ben-xvi\_mes\_20120124\_46th-world-communications-day.html

Cecez-Kecmanovic, D. & Janson, M. (1999). Communicative action theory: An approach to understanding the application of information systems. Proc. *10th Australasian Conference on Information Systems.* Retrieved from https//pdfs.semanticscholar.org/29d6/ on 20/4/2018. [

Eze, Michael O. I am Because You Are. *THE UNESCO COURIER*. OCTOBER / DECEMBER 2012. Retrieved on 25/2/24 from [I am because you are | The UNESCO Courier](https://courier.unesco.org/en/articles/i-am-because-you-are)

Habermas, Jürgen. *The Theory of Communicative Action Volume One: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*. Translated by Thomas McCarthy. Boston: Beacon Press,1984

Pheasant, Hannah. *Discourse Ethics for the Digital Sphere.* Berkeley, CA: Graduate Theological Union, October 24, 2017

Johnson, SMB. *Social Media Spiritual Roadmap: Reinforcing the Place of the Church on the Social Media in Africa*. Accessed 17 February 2024. [www.smbafrica.org](http://www.smbafrica.org).

Galal, S. (2022). *Social media in Africa – Statistics and facts*. Statistica. Retrieved from https:// [www.statista.com/topics/9922/social-media-in-africa/#dossier-chapter1](http://www.statista.com/topics/9922/social-media-in-africa/#dossier-chapter1)

Pontifical Council for Social Communications [PCSC]. 2000. “Ethics in Communications.” Vatican Website. Accessed 21 February 2024. [http://www.vatican.va/roman\_curia/pontifical\_ councils/pccs/documents/rc\_pc\_pccs\_doc\_20000530\_ethics-communications\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_%20councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20000530_ethics-communications_en.html)

Boakye, Bridget. *Social Media Futures: Changing the African Narrative, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, April 2021****.*** Accessed 21 February 2024. [Social Media Futures: Changing the African Narrative, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, April 2021 (wathi.org)](https://www.wathi.org/social-media-futures-changing-the-african-narrative-tony-blair-institute-for-global-change-april-2021/)

Raphael Nhongo, Baba P. Tshotsho and Tendai F. Muringa. 2021. The ‘anti-sociality’ of social media as portrayed in selected Zimdancehall songs*. The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa* ISSN*: (*Online) 2415-2005, (Print) 1817-4434*)*