

Towards the Responsible Use of Available Tools on the Internet

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Not too long ago, the internet has been primarily used by people as a means of accessing information which they use for various fields and applications. Traditionally, persons acted as consumers of information available on the internet thanks to its speed and ease of access. With the advent of blogging and the booming of social networking sites, the way the internet has been used has started to change as well. People are no longer merely consumers of information, but they also become producers of information which they share in a virtual community, linked together in a web site of a social networking platform. While before, people were content with “listening” to what others had to say, now people are more enthusiastic about “speaking” their opinions on the internet. Freedom of speech has found a new home on the internet and this has certainly been good, because it has given everyone an almost equal opportunity with the rest of the world. This freedom has an inherent risk, because the right to free speech also opens up the possibility for it to be used in ways that are deemed harmful and hurtful to others. Taking it from the cue of Pope John Paul II, the question about the just use of freedom must be given consideration. While people have a right to speak and be heard, is this right devoid of any ethical responsibility? Given that social networking sites are instruments created by man, does it have a purpose other than the mere extension of one’s freedom? This paper seeks to reflect on the current situation of man and his use of the internet vis-à-vis Pope Benedict XVI’s message for the 45th World Communications Day by focusing on the moral dimension on the use of the internet.

Keywords: *social networking platform, Pope Benedict XVI, search engines, freedom, responsibility*

Introduction

Since its early stages, the presence and influence of the internet on the lives of people has been rapidly increasing. As a tool, the internet has made communication much faster and more convenient for both personal and professional use. Also known as the information superhighway, the internet has also become a means for its user to have quick and immediate access to a vast amount of information which can be found easily with the help of search engines and other applications. Aside from these, the internet is also used to push and promote one's business with its ability to host information on products, companies and profiles. The internet also serves as a means by which people are able to share various digital files with other users through various file sharing programs and applications. As of late, the internet has evolved from being a means of communication to a "virtual world" altogether with the creation of social networks. Nowadays, the line that separated the real world from the virtual world has become increasingly blurry due to the rapid changes that the internet is bringing to the lives of its users.

Communication is a natural activity of man and the internet gives rise to new forms and means of communication. The right to free speech and expression has now found a new home in the internet especially with the advent of various social networking sites. While the users are primarily "consumers" of information, now they could participate in the dialogue by also being "producers" of information which is shared with other users on the internet. Man's freedom has expanded rapidly due to the possibilities that the internet offers to its users. Now, users have a voice which could be heard by an even greater audience which was quite unimaginable around a decade ago. With each user's freedom finding a new place of expression thanks to the internet, there arises a risk alongside this fact. This paper reflects on Pope Benedict XVI's message on the 45th World Communications Day in relation to the changes and trends emerging with the evolution of the internet. With all these changes happening, the use of the internet as a means of communication must always take note of some ethical considerations.

Some Notes On Freedom

Freedom is a term and a concept given primacy in discussing the human person, because it is one of those definitive characteristics which sets a person apart from all other creatures in the created world. Man is a free being who is capable of making decisions and determining oneself towards a certain goal without being

moved by anything other than the self. It is also because of freedom that man is able to make ethical choices and perform ethical actions. Because of freedom, man may perform good or evil actions. The performance of good or evil actions has its corresponding consequences:

If I am free, I can make good or bad use of my freedom. If I use it well, I in my turn will become more ‘good’ as a result, and the good I have accomplished has a positive influence on those around me. If on the other hand, I use it wrongly, evil will take root and begin to spread both in me and around me.¹

In contemporary times, a certain concept of freedom, which has widespread support in public opinion, diverts attention from ethical responsibilities.² This view of freedom seeks freedom for its own sake – what matters is to be free and released from every form of restraint and limitation. This view of freedom certainly sounds empowering for it breaks away from any norm that may put a limit on it. Although liberating, this view of freedom poses a lot of risks on the part of the agent of action as well as the people and the world around him. Freedom which cuts itself apart from ethical considerations will inevitably give rise to various forms of violence against the self and against others.

Properly speaking, freedom is not to be understood simply as “freedom from” but more importantly “freedom for.” Pope John Paul II in his reflections first poses the question on the just use of freedom to which he replies that the just use of freedom is for love.

Freedom and Responsibility on the Internet

As stated above, the freedom of expression has found a new home and has expanded exponentially thanks to the possibilities that the internet offers. Not only has it sped up communication, but it also made possible new forms of communication. Pope Benedict notes that:

...just as the Industrial Revolution in its day brought about a profound transformation in society by the modifications it introduced into the cycles of production and the lives of workers, so today the radical changes taking place in communications are guiding significant cultural and social developments. The new technologies are not only changing the way we communicate, but communication itself, so much so that

¹ Pope John Paul II, *Memory and Identity*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005), page 37.

² Ibid.

it could be said that we are living through a period of vast cultural transformation. This means of spreading information and knowledge is giving birth to a new way of learning and thinking, with unprecedented opportunities for establishing relationships and building fellowship.³

The internet is not only a means by which people communicate, but it is also a new mode of communication. Communication is not only about sharing one's thoughts, ideas, feelings and sentiments, but it is also sharing one's self. To a certain extent, the world has gotten smaller and closer, because it is not easier to communicate with people who are physically far away. This leads not only to an exchange of selves but also to an exchanges of cultures, morals, virtues and values. The Holy Father underlines the importance of man's participation in this new form of communication not only in terms of authenticity but also in terms of being a witness to the Gospel. In his view, one need fill his messages and posts with religious content to bear witness to the truth of the Gospel.

The power and influence of the internet over the lives of people is also something that needs careful reflection and consideration. As people post a variety of content visible to their social network, they are also affecting the lives of other people. Communication between persons should lead to a communion of persons which makes a community of persons. The new technologies allow people to meet each other beyond the confines of space and their own culture, creating in this way an entirely new world of potential friendships.⁴ While this may be a great opportunity, it also carries a lot of risks. Whenever one is communicating with another person, one must always take note of the ethical considerations and implications of what and how one is communicating with another person. Prudence, respect and restraint must be cultivated and practiced by any person who makes use of the internet. The lack of such has certainly led to various forms of violence and attacks against people such as cyber-bullying, slander, defamation, etc. Just as people are called to be true and authentic in the real world, so must the users of the internet do the same.

With these in mind, Pope Benedict XVI calls on to the internet users with an informed and responsible creativity to participate in the network of relations made possible with these social networks.⁵ These new technologies must not be shunned away as evil but rather, they are great opportunities for personal growth

³ Pope Benedict XVI, *Truth, Proclamation and Authenticity of Life in the Digital Age*, accessed through: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20110124_45th-world-communications-day_en.html

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

and development as well as the formation and strengthening of legitimate bonds with other persons. In the final analysis, one must always keep in mind that while it possible to post just about any kind of content on the internet, not all possibilities must be entertained for they may only bring further harm to oneself as well as others. Given that the line between the real world and the digital world is further blurred and relativized, one must be even more cautious, careful and considerate in his use of the internet as a means and mode of communication. The vast possibilities of the internet need to be explored and harnessed by every individual person so that he may use it to bring about goodness. Instead of posting and sharing every single thought that comes to mind, it is always good to put some thought into it before actually sharing it to the rest of the world.

Conclusion

The idea of responsible posting/sharing/blogging is certainly not new to anyone yet much of the digital world needs to be reminded of this lesson. Due to its speed and convenience, one can very easily blurt out on the internet just as one blurts out on the street. This advantage afforded by the internet also carries a huge risk which exposes the users to harm and violence in a variety of forms. The Holy Father's message calls on every individual who has access to the internet to make use of its potentials and possibilities for spreading the Gospel to others as well as the building and nurturing of friendships from all over the world. Just as one is called to be true, honest and sincere in the real world, these same virtues must also be present in one's digital presence in any social network. There have been material and external constraints that filter the content but in the end, it still goes back to the person and how he makes use of his newfound freedom in a place called the internet. Instead of simply posting for the sake of posting (or perhaps for the sake of popularity), it is always better to post and share whatever it is that may be good and helpful to fellow users of the internet. ■

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