

Internet – the Agora of the 21st Century

Communication of Young People on the Internet

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1. Different ways and styles of communication

I want to consider how young people communicate today on the Internet. They do this as a new generation, as the generation of digital natives. Maybe young people always have communicated in another way than adults. Plato described Socrates' complaints about public discussions on the agora,¹ – the ancient marketplace in historic Greece. Today, young people are communicating in the world of the Internet especially on platforms. So I call these platforms the “agora of the 21st Century” – the marketplace, where nearly everything is possible, for different groups with different aims.

But as a first step let me tell you about my own family and how we communicate with each other through the Internet. For about six months our eldest son was living in New Zealand. And we communicated by email, by sms, by Skype, by video-Skype, by Facebook-chat and also by the good old post card. But, for us the new situation was that another world entered ours. Suddenly today was tomorrow (because of the distance between Switzerland and New Zealand). Two worlds – spaces – were built in our real life in a temporal synchronization but in completely different contexts.

So, at the same time, our eldest son was both very close to us and very far away as well, concerned with the same global issues, connected by the same technical possibilities for spoken and written words, for pictures and movies; but we lived in different contexts with no logical connections like the volcano on Iceland that occupied us, or like the great hospitality of the people in New Zealand our son enjoyed. For the first time we really felt the intensity of how the Internet may help to communicate across diffe-

rent living spaces different cultures, in different worlds.

The famous “global village” became a reality for us; as did another reality of becoming calmer parents, concerned about their son who began to discover another world, far away from us. It wasn't *one* communication or one style of communication we used. It was completely different to feel our son, to “read him” in the Facebook-chat or to talk with him by video-Skype, to read his short messages by mobile device or to read his wall posts on Facebook and so on. The languages, the syntaxes, the icons, the vocabulary and the Internet environment opened us to completely different ways of communication with just one particular person.

2. Communication on the Internet: Content First

Question: Do young people talk (on the Internet) about politics, religion, ethical questions, the meaning of life? Yes, they do; and, no they don't. “No they don't”: this means no, they don't communicate like adults do in structured situations and, in a deepened or intensive way (provided that adults do so). But on the other hand: Yes, they do talk about religious questions, but how?

Let me mention this: You can find research on connections between young people and the Internet – or on their communication on the Internet. You also can find some publications about young people and their life-topics like work, the future, global warming, and politics (Hurrelmann, 2010). You can find research about religiosity today (e.g.: published by the Religion Monitor of Bertelsmann¹). But there is no study on the combined topics: young people on the Internet and their communication about

religion. And exactly this topic would be interesting to me as person in charge of the radio and television performances of the protestant church in Switzerland and as a member of the management of the 'Reformierte Medien' (media company of the protestant [reformed] churches). I did not find any study on religious questions young people deal with, or on the importance of religious questions in their life.

There are multiple reasons that could be responsible for the lack of research on young people and religion. One of the reasons may be: in Europe religious questions and their importance are far away of the mainstream of social issues; the tax-supported churches in Europe are losing members due to various social circumstances and there is also the phenomenon of people leaving their churches. Another reason may be: the Internet is a constantly changing, constantly growing and self-innovating system – with a speed to develop we never had before. Perhaps studies on a field, such as religion, are judged to be marginal and therefore not in the foreground of research on it.

Today the Internet allows young people to communicate using various skills. The Internet offers them to just consume content, but also to participate in collaborations, to build up communities, to form or change an opinion about social and political facts, and to form a collective know-how.

From the point of view of *broadcasting stations* there are some implications. The forced process of convergence of radio, television and the Internet to unique multi-media companies gives them new opportunities to develop their presence on the Internet. This is important for the broadcasting stations, given that their target audience is young and, as research shows, young people watch less and less television on traditional channels; they watch news and other telecasts—if they look them at all—more and more on the Internet: this means, on demand.

Other groups strongly interested in the presence on the Internet are *organizations* like governments, schools, and universities. As for churches, the use of the Internet by young people challenges them to intensify their presence on the Internet. The development of online imple-

mentation for religious content gives new opportunities to reach young people, too. What is new and specific to young people: if they google, they do it in searching specific topics, they choose sites connected by searched contents, but they don't do it by looking for organizations, such as, for example, television stations, the official sites of political parties, or even for churches.

If content sites are read and accepted by young people, this may encourage another identification with the organizations sponsoring them. Looking for content, for a special subject is the first step they do. If they are interested in the content they identify - in a second step - the organization. This procedure is the opposite way of a traditional identification, e.g. first look for the political, social or ecclesiastical organization and then for the content they offer. For young people it is just the other way round: first content, then organization.

Finally, there are businesses. For them, communication on the Internet has implications. Since mainly young people visit their sites on the agora "Internet" and, since they are mainly digital natives, businesses must install various files on different platforms to reach this target group. And businesses do it on various platforms. They carefully observe the different platforms young people visit and try to place their messages appropriately.

In only a few years, platforms have grown up very fast. "Facebook," "favourite," "yahoo," "xing," "delicious," "digg," "reddit," and "myspace" are well-known platforms, called: "social media" or "social communities." Lots of economically motivated sites or inclusions are present on these platforms. We have no public surveys on the influence of sites produced with economic motives.

Nevertheless these social media are more and more important on the Internet as communities and as tools for developing public opinion. And they are available for all users and their opinions. In Europe, companies started recently to understand that it could be important to observe the feedback of users on social media. "BP America—for example and, well-known in the U.S.—created a site on Facebook after the oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico. They tried to

explain the disaster and to win readers' understanding of their position, sadly too late. There were already a dozen of other sites about BP, but with completely different content, with different interests and different aims: with criticism, questions, and scoffing filmlets.

These sites – made and circulated mainly by young people – may be funny in one or the other case but, they may give offense in others; in any case they are the expression of today's youth. Their meanings expressed on the Internet form a unique landscape and at the same time a wild scenery of opinions with a lot of possibilities to communicate in a vice versa, reciprocal way.

3. Social Media as platforms for ethical and religious content

Let us make the following note: Digital natives discuss politics and economy in the open space of social media. Digital natives take their time to exchange with others even if this is not a question of a particular generation. Whoever is on social media takes part in this kind of discussion; it is a question of "social media culture." They discuss in social media, on platforms defined by topics, by emotions, by life-styles and so on and open for everyone.

Immediately the question arises how to consider this flood of conversations. Do digital natives understand the same things with the same words as other digital natives? As other people on the Internet? As people who don't communicate via Internet? I guess this is a context of pluralism, perhaps comparable to the communication on the ancient agora. It is right that only on the former agora did equal citizens deliberate on political and social questions important to Athens. What is comparable is that people who are able to understand each other in a face-to-face conversation with an approximately comparable horizon and open to the ways of thinking of others should also be able to understand Internet contributions. People who are firmly rooted in their specific social milieu and its way of thinking and understanding will probably not understand what other milieus are talking about. But this is an experience of daily life: who understands what others mean? There is an offered opportunity to clarify by asking

questions and providing answers. But it is never clear if Internet users do understand each other or not. A smile icon at the end of a sentence, for example, can be a hint to emphasize how the author meant what s/he wrote: ironic? serious? But even if the author's intention were clear, one could not be sure that the addressee would really understand. In real life, I observed discussions in which people were continuously sorting out what they meant and others did not grasp the idea. So real understanding of what the other meant is a complex process in real life as well as on the Internet. There is no guarantee of understanding.

And I would accentuate again: we are concerned with people's communication on the Internet. This communication does not concern people themselves. An example: on Twitter an abbot from Switzerland constantly posts his thoughts and opinions; he tells of his every day life, the difficulties he has, what he is doing next. Astonishingly: more than three thousand young people who read his tweets (short-messages) are touched by them and follow him. He expresses his thoughts and impressions two lines per two lines in a very simple but comprehensible language. There you can read, for example: "This week pilgrimage of Gypsies. I'll visit their locations. They are less protected than we are." Or: "Tempest left obviously large damage in the monastery. Holidays cancelled." And: "Every day I have again and again a date with the boss ;-)." These messages communicate his thoroughness as a clergyman, but stay open for the reactions of the users.

Although we know how difficult it is for the clergy in Europe to signal presence on the Internet and to get the attention that these short contributions show, even a clergyman is able to adjust his language skills for a specific public and to reach it. He writes his two line contributions to reach young people. This is possible on an Internet platform not specifically designed for young people. The abbot has numerous reactions to his postings, such as existential questions and religious opinions, and he answers them with his religious thoughts. It is like pastoral care in digital space.

As to the language on Internet chats, it is short. The vocabulary is small. Users create new words, combine words into new ones, the

spelling is often somewhat strange for people who are used to writing, and the syntax is easier than the written one – such as mine in this lecture. The language on the Internet is definitively more a spoken language than the written one people should have learned in school. This language is not stupid, but simplified; a language we are used to in everyday spoken language. It seems as if it were possible to let participate all these people who are able and want to understand this style of language, to accept it and to react to it.

As to the content of Internet contributions, it has to be of interest for young people. It has to meet them in the problems they are confronted with and they are thinking about. If you have a look at chat rooms, at blogs or at e-mails, digital natives discuss not only superficial issues. Of course, often you can observe a never-ending conversation without a specific aim and without a focused interest. But you can also find questions about serious topics young people are dealing with: their uncertain future, their situation as young employees, their worries about the environment or questions around an unwelcome birth or a welcome one, around an unwelcome death or a welcome one. These are questions about the meaning of life and how to manage it—these are ethical questions, not really the religious ones I was searching for, but religion is mainly based on ethics. Even if young people do not discuss explicitly religious questions, they deal with them—perhaps unconsciously—via the questions they have and the discussion about them. Young people look for a responsible life.

So, the communication on the Internet is not only for fun, it also contains discussions about serious problems young people may have. As I mentioned before, I did not find explicit discussions on religious matters. I found discussions about ethical matters. And these are often implicitly religious too.

4. Communication paralleled and synchronized

In Europe, television, radio, print media today – and churches too – work basically on one-way communications; the know-how and the knowledge is located at a fixed point, person or an authority. The audience is a consumer or

member. Still, in Europe, not too many years ago, the Internet was a one-way-communication too. It was like a digitalized copy of the broadcasting program, the aims of the organization, or the company guide-lines. Today the Internet, with its social media (such as Facebook and others) seems to be an example of civil society. It is not a top-down system, but a networked system – basically for content, with a lot of players in politics, economics, cultures, NGOs and specific and specialized enterprises. In my view it is astonishing that on YouTube a posted filmlet with religious content is visited by more than 34 million users (Handel's Messiah in a supermarket). Political changes such as democratic processes and ecological interventions are more and more supported successfully by social media-interventions.

This system functions only as a multi-way, interactive system and as a system of permanent “synchronization.” Digital natives today are organized and are working in exactly that way, parallel and synchronized. Let me give an example of this parallel system and of networked synchronization using the Internet. During a World Cup match in South Africa: It was possible to get information about current players and about their home bases and their families. It was possible to watch the last episode of the Simpsons, which showed a scene about racism. It was possible to google (e.g. on the website of *Wikipedia*) news about Nelson Mandela's life, because he was one of the famous guests at the soccer evening. And not excluded: It was possible to do homework for the next school day while chatting with friends on Facebook. And let me mention again: It was a parallel situation, but it was the one and only happening during this period of time. This is not a theory; it is a real life description of the country I live in.

For digital natives all this is normal: To be online, to consume online, to find solutions online only, to discuss in online social media often synchronized with others and at the same time to be present on different platforms. It's something else, the way digital natives are able to recognize what a situation means, to be a part of a community. For many users to be networked seems to mean: “it's just great” and they enjoy and consume. For others, the Internet offers other possibilities.

5. To share, to collaborate and, to create

There is no one in the Internet who would define general rules or could specify instructions; and this is a fascinating fact, especially for young people. Everyone can be his or her own author. Everyone can edit and publish anything, for example: After 9/11, a 21-year-old man (Eli Pariser) created an online community against the violent reaction of the U.S. Administration; this community developed to a protest group (moveon.org), now a half-million strong. Eli Pariser visibly spoke for a great number of people.

On the Internet young people can *share*. It is possible to share their own know-how, products, experiences, emotions, nonsense, and opinions with others. The Internet is really like the ancient agora where even young people are basically respected partners. Social media are really open for everything on one hand for serious discussions on the other for humoristic slapsticks and for nonsense, too. Often you can't see the difference – sense and nonsense are merging. For example, there is a short movie on YouTube, produced by some professional actors, of a slapstick parody in a conference-room. This movie shows the BP oil spill disaster in the Gulf of Mexico shown as a business meeting in which the actors are fighting against spilled coffee without any solution. It's only a slapstick indeed, but it stimulates a moment of political discussion. There are a lot of serious comments written beneath, shared by over ten million users. I don't expect that this movie helps to find solutions for the Gulf of Mexico, but obviously it initiates a sensitivity to and discussion of questions about the environment.

On the Internet young people can *collaborate*. Collaborate means: To develop papers, software, political or ethical statements, presentations in real time, alone or as groups. Other young people read and think about these presentations and put their reactions as answers on the Internet. So it is possible to intensify the commitment on the Internet. Young people find different forms of participation between just consuming content up to constructing recommendations for behavior.

Nevertheless, the question arises: Do young people have time to commit to something? One year ago, I examined the Forrester research about participation of users on the Internet (2010). The results were: ninety percent are consuming, nine percent are communicating and only one percent is creative on the Internet. Today the same online survey service declares: thirty-three percent are communicating and twenty-four percent are creating. These results seem to be unbelievable; are they credible? I don't know. Also, each study could be completed in the way the researcher wants, and with suggested targets formulated by the institution who paid for it. Anyway, even if the results of this research and its evaluation opens only a perspective, it may prove that the Internet and its use is changing constantly.

6. Structure of social media, structure of religious communication

Let me close my paper with the following thoughts: For organizations with a top down view such as churches, at least in Europe – I see one current question: If an "authority" is convinced it knows what the truth is, is convinced it knows what life means, is convinced it is the one and only ethical authority, there will not be communication on the Internet about religion and there will not be religious discussions with young people or between young people. These seem to be the main points churches have to think about in the near future. Churches will only reach young people when they learn to deal with problems young people have and when they learn to reach them in their reality. Young people need open systems of communication; this holds also true for communication about religious questions. Young people need partners not involved in a top-down system, such as churches, but committed in a dialogue where they are on an equal level as partners.

For organizations like churches in Europe this means, first of all to discuss their petrified top-down structures and come to a more flexible and more audience oriented attitude. Second, to go to the "agora," to observe the "marketplace," to choose what is obvious to do, and to verify what is evident for the society and to consider what is possible to offer as current "religious

products.” To understand what the current topics of the users are, and as a result, to learn to see the world with the eyes of the users, this is the consequence of being a part of social media.

Finally, churches should learn to be equal partners in the main topics of the global society. Churches aren't omniscient; but they have a

long and important tradition to question, and question until answers are given by the people. This seems to me to be the way European churches (I refer to the Protestant churches) should enter into and maintain a dialogue with young people – especially mobilized via the possibilities the Internet offers.

Notes

- ¹ The idea of 'agora' follows the concept developed at the beginning of the 'agora thinking' in ancient Greece.
- ² The Bertelsmann foundation RELIGION MONITOR is an instrument that looks at the issues of religion and faith to an unprecedented degree. It was developed by religious scientists, sociologists, psycho-logists and theologians and was first employed in 2007.

In a representative survey, 21,000 people from all continents and world religions were asked about their views on the world and the meaning of life, their religious practices and notions of God. The project will be repeated and expanded at regular intervals in order to carry out and produce an empirical study of the development of religiousness.

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