

TOWARDS AN APPLIED ETHICS IN DIGITAL COMMUNICATION: A TRANSDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVE ON RESPONSIBILITY

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Abstract: *In this article, we proposed an ethical analysis of the actors involved in digital communication, starting from the communication model developed by David Berlo. Thus, we identified the sources of transmission of a message, the characteristics of the message, the channels through which it is transmitted and which are the possible recipients, asking ourselves, through an exercise of applied ethics, what the responsibility of each one is. We argued that there are several ethical issues for each component of Berlo's model which can influence digital communication. Considering that 'digital ethics' is still a fairly narrow field, the transdisciplinary approach we proposed in this article has the advantage of opening up the area of applicability of ethics in the field of digital communication.*

Keywords: *applied ethics, digital communication, digital ethics, ethics of digital communication*

Introduction

Ethics has taken an important turn in recent decades. With the work of Hans Jonas³, who anticipated the need for an ethics of the future and, therefore, for an ethics applied in the technological age, the attempts of philosophers to discuss and understand the new challenges of the world led to a broadening of the notion of ethics. We can discuss, for example, about ethics applied in business, about ethics applied in communication, about ethics of organizations, about digital ethics, about ethical counseling, etc. Thus, this research can be included in the area of applied ethics, more precisely, in the sphere of digital communication. Also, if we analyze ethics as a whole and discuss the distinction between normative ethics and

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³ Hans Jonas, *The imperative of responsibility: In Search of An Ethics for the Technological Age*, trans. by Hans Jonas and David Herr, Chicago & London, The University of Chicago Press, 1984.

descriptive ethics⁴, the transdisciplinary approach proposed by us falls rather in the area of descriptive ethics.

Another preliminary observation is that by digital communication, in this context, we consider any act of communication between two or more people where a message is communicated through technology. So we proceed from a first hypothesis, namely that the classic models of communication non-mediated by technology can be transposed into the digital field. The second hypothesis is the act of digital communication, as well as the act of face-to-face communication are not limited to communicating a message, but in addition, it is related to the behavior, conduct and even the moral law (claiming universality) of people. Therefore, given the above hypotheses, it is clear that ethics necessarily interferes in the act of digital communication. But how exactly does ethics intervene in the field of digital communication? In other words, what does a “digital ethics of communication” mean in this case? In order to establish an answer to these questions we will discuss further a particular case of digital communication.

Consequently, in this paper we will make an analysis of applied ethics in the digital field, using the linear communication model of David Berlo. This will serve as a theoretical framework to delimit the four components of communication. Using this scheme of communication as a starting point, we aim to describe and interpret the ethical aspects which are encountered in each of the four components, and also we try to point out both the relevance and necessity of ethics in the digital world and, hence, in the contemporary world.

⁴ What is this distinction? The difference between *descriptive ethics* and *normative ethics* is that in descriptive ethics, sometimes called the descriptive method of ethics, people's forms of action and behavior are investigated using values and validation requirements that consider the community and also include judgments on the moral law, which is considered binding; while through normative ethics we consider criteria according to which the moral evaluation of actions is allowed. In the present study we will use the descriptive method, which follows the above definition.

1. Actors and actions: using SMCR model of communication in an applied ethics exercise

Berlo's model⁵, entitled Sender – Message – Channel – Receiver (we will use the acronym SMCR below), starts from the definition of the existence of these four components of communication. Even if this model of communication is a classic one, specific to the period when communication non-mediated by the technology was dominant, our effort will be directed towards adapting it to the specifics of the online environment and to the way interactions take place in this environment. This model of communication serves us only as a theoretical support for the separation of the four components, without intervening on the structure proposed by the author. Another clarification would be that we limit ourselves, given the space allocated, only to these four components, without addressing in detail the factors defined by Berlo for each of them. We will refer to them when they are necessary for us to understand and explain the specifics or dynamics of the analyzed actor.

Thus, starting from a transdisciplinary vision, which combines elements of philosophy, sociology and communication sciences, we propose an exercise of applied ethics, where we aim to describe the place that ethics occupies among each of these components. As for other research works that have used the SMCR model in their analyzes, these can be found in a vast number of fields. An example similar to the one proposed by us is the one developed by Edson C. Tandoc Jr.⁶, who used the same communication model to understand and explain how disinformation and fake news affect each of the actors involved in communicating and spreading messages in the online environment. In our approach, in a similar way, we will use the model developed by David Berlo to analyze each of the actors involved in the digital interactional context, with a penchant for the ethical component of the actions they take in the digital communication scheme.

⁵ David Berlo, *The process of communication: an introduction to theory and practice*, Holt, Reinhart and Winston, New York, 1960. Completed later in: David Berlo, "Communication as Process: Review and Commentary", *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 1:1, 1977, pp. 11-27.

⁶ Edson Tandoc, "Tools of Disinformation: How Fake News Gets to Deceive", in Shashi Jayakumar, Benjamin Ang, Nur Diyanah Anwar (eds.), *Disinformation and Fake News*, Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore, 2021, pp. 35-46.

2. Source(s)

As David Berlo mentions, “all human communication has some source, some person or group of persons with a purpose, a reason for engaging in communication”⁷. Therefore, involvement in the communication process can be done by two types of sources: (1) on the one hand, the individual sources where any person can become a transmitter in the online environment, with a spread that depends on the social network he or she is part of, respectively by the number of people following him/her; (2) on the other hand, we can discuss about the organizational sources, where the messages transmitted can reach a much wider audience, and they, in general, are elaborated by professionals, specialized people (journalists, newsrooms, press organizations). Complementing the above with the writings of Manuel Castells⁸, we can differentiate between three types of communication: (1) interpersonal communication, (2) mass communication and (3) mass self-communication, the author stating that these “coexist, interact, and complement each other rather than substituting for one another”⁹. Thus, in the first instance, when we refer to digital communication, we refer to the concept of mass self-communication, where each individual can become engaged in an act of one-to-many communication, similar to the act carried out by media organizations. This transformation of the communication process occurred with the development of the online environment, respectively the development of new platforms, in the form of communication channels, an aspect that we will address in the section dedicated to this topic.

In the case of individual sources, where we discuss mass self-communication, the sources are those which create the message and select the information they transmit to potential recipients. Thus, the source can be influenced in the online environment by the factors stated by Berlo (communication skills, attitudes, knowledge, social system, culture). For example, a person's decision to select information to share on his/her personal page on a social platform may interfere with his/her intentions,

⁷ David Berlo, *The process of communication: an introduction to theory and practice*, Holt, Reinhart and Winston, New York, 1960, p. 30.

⁸ Manuel Castells, *Communication Power*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2009, p. 55.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 55.

interests, beliefs or convictions.¹⁰ We note, therefore, that the act of communication transferred to the digital environment or mass self-communication “is also self-generated in content, self-directed in emission, and self-selected in reception by many who communicate with many. This is a new communication realm, and ultimately a new medium, whose backbone is made of computer networks, whose language is digital, and whose senders are globally distributed and globally interactive”¹¹. We can abstract from here the similarity between the digital communication made by the individual actors and the one made by the organizational actors. If in the first case the responsibility and commitment to communication belong to individuals, in the case of communication made by the organizational actors we can turn our attention to a professional ethics, with predilection in the field of journalism. First, we cannot overlook the profound change that affected this profession, a true paradigm shift that happened together with moving from analog to digital news¹². Thereupon, it can be said that:

“Communication ethics, on the other hand, describes the professional ethics of those working in communication-related professions, namely in the media sector. In this context it is described as a field defining the professional ethics of people and institutions who produce and engage in news in news agencies, newspapers, radio and television organizations, or on internet platforms, which are expressed as new media, as well as those who create content in these media other than the news and those whose productions take part in the media even if they are not members of the media.”¹³

¹⁰ From here, various effects can evolve, e.g., echo chambers, epistemic bubbles, false consensus, selective exposure.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 70.

¹² Deni Elliott, Edward H. Spence, *Ethics for a Digital Era*, Wiley Blackwell, Hoboken, 2018, pp. 13-17.

¹³ Özlem Arda, Zuhale Akmeşe, “Media Ethics: Evaluation of Television News in the Context of the Media and Ethics Relationship”, in Meliha Nurdan Taskiran and Fatih Pinarbaşı (eds.), *Multidisciplinary approaches to ethics in the digital era*, IGI Global, Hershey PA, 2020, pp. 96-110, p. 98.

On the other hand, Díaz-Campo and Segado-Boj¹⁴ analyzing 99 professional codes in this field, noticed that only 9 of them referred to the digital space. Thus, we can notice that ethics could not keep up with the fast pace of the evolution of the digital environment. The focus on organizational actors needs to be somewhat more important than on individual actors, as they can easily reach much wider audiences, so “most often, the act of organizational communication takes place along with social and moral responsibility. The influence of ethics and of communication is mutual”¹⁵.

Regarding the relationship established by the transmitters and receivers, we will analyze the latter in another section of this paper. Berlo noted that these “are mutually interdependent, for existence and for feedback. Each of them continually exerts influence over himself and others by the kinds of responses that he makes to the messages he produces and receives. A newspaper affects its readers by selecting the news they are allowed to read. On the other hand, the readers also affect the newspaper (although probably not as much as some publishers would have us believe). If readers do not buy the paper (negative feedback), it may change its selection and presentation of news”¹⁶. Therefore, some of those presented here are also valid for receivers and vice versa.

3. Message(s)

In Berlo's model, the message has the following factors: content, elements, treatment, structure and code. Of course, Berlo wrote that “At least three factors need to be taken into account in the message: (1) the message code, (2) the message content, and (3) the message treatment”¹⁷. In the present paper, without attempting an ethical analysis for each such factor, we will address the issue in a more general note. As follows, we will discuss briefly about how we can do things with words, and then make a compressed foray into the theory of speech-acts, and this transition to the theory of

¹⁴ Jesús Díaz-Campo, Francisco Segado-Boj, “Journalism ethics in a digital environment: How journalistic codes of ethics have been adapted to the Internet and ICTs in countries around the world”, *Telematics and Informatics*, 32(4), 2015, pp. 735-744.

¹⁵ Sandu Frunză, “Minimal Ethics and the New Configuration of the Public Space”, *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, 11 (32), 2012, p. 9.

¹⁶ David Berlo, *Op. cit.*, p. 113.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 54.

action should then become the starting point for a brief ethical analysis. Moreover, it is important to emphasize, from the beginning, the idea that any action to conceive and send a message can be morally imputed. Therefore, transposing into the language of ethics, the following idea arises: we are responsible for our actions.

John L. Austin distinguishes between two classes of statements: *performatives* and *constatives*.¹⁸ The formers are distinguished by the fact that their enunciation is the same as doing what is enunciated, for example, promises. Thus, performatives have the ability to do by speaking only if they are expressed by first person present indicative verbs.

Obviously, this distinction was overcome by the theory of *speech-acts*¹⁹. As Paul Ricœur observed: “The initial opposition between two classes of statements is incorporated into a more radical distinction that concerns the hierarchical levels that can be discerned in all statements, whether constative or performative. It is of the utmost importance for the following discussion that these levels designate different acts. If saying is doing, it is indeed in terms of acts that we must speak of saying.”²⁰ Therefore, if we were to ask which of these acts are combined in the general act of speaking, we must mention the distinction between the act of locutionary act, illocutionary act and the perlocutionary act. This is the point when the French philosopher mentioned that the theory of action must begin.²¹

Given these hypotheses, we can ask ourselves if we can “do things with words”, especially when we use the first person, and how can we ethically analyze the “behavior” of the transmitters in the age of digital communication? Of course, we can extend this question, because it seems to us that when we send a message (written or oral), independent of the communication channel, according to the above, we initiate an *action*.

Therefore, we can justify Paul Ricœur when he advanced the idea of moral imputation. For the French thinker, imputation is a judgment that consists in attributing someone as the perpetrator of an action that can be

¹⁸ John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, Oxford University Press, 1962.

¹⁹ John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, London, Cambridge University Press, 1969.

²⁰ Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, translated by Kathleen Blamey, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1995, p. 42.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 43.

morally assessed as good or bad, allowed or forbidden, right or wrong; on the other hand, the idea of imputability also advances. Imputability is more radical than imputation; it expresses the ability of an agent to enter under imputation.²²

When it comes to the topicality of digital communication, the responsibility for transmitting messages (code, content, treatment) rests with the sender, in Berlo's language, the source, as well as with the receiver. A handy example to illustrate this may be one of the new challenges of digital communication, namely fake news, one of the current forms of disinformation. The wide access to technology and the strong digitalization have allowed anyone with access to a device connected to the Internet to become a consumer of information, but at any time the consumer can also become a possible transmitter (re-distributor) of information.

Returning to Berlo, in the SMCR model of communication, the source and the receiver are represented by the same factors (communication skills, attitudes, knowledge, social system, culture). Therefore, the source and the receiver intersect at the level of the message, the common interactional context, so speaking about moral imputation on the actions of transmitting or receiving the message implies a mutual responsibility. On the one hand, the responsibility of the sender, because he always wants the message sent not only to be understood, but also to persuade his recipient. On the other hand, the attitude of the receiver towards receiving the message consists in a semiotic-hermeneutic act of understanding, depending on the norms and moral obligations related to the culture (individual, community, organizational, as the case may be).

As such, at the ethical level of action (to send and receive a written or oral message), even if it is a face-to-face communication or a digital communication, we consider it is appropriate to remember the famous statement of Aristotle which opens *Nicomachean Ethics*: "Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim."²³

²² Idem, *Anthropologie philosophique. Écrits et conférences 3*, Éditions du Seuil, 2013, p. 306.

²³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by W. D. Ross, Batoche Books, Kitchener, 1999, p. 3.

4. Channel(s)

If Berlo by the channel refers to the environment through which the message is transmitted (such as hearing, seeing, touching, smelling or tasting), the digital space has fundamentally changed the way we can discuss communication channels. Thus, our attention is directed rather towards communication platforms and any means through which user-generated content (from old forums to social media platforms) can be hosted and distributed, but also any other element of digital communication infrastructure used by new media or by individual transmitters. In the following, we propose a brief analysis of them, respectively, of the main ethical aspects on which we focus our attention.

A delimitation we consider useful to understand the specifics of the channels on which the messages are spread in the online environment is between open media and closed media²⁴; if the first can be associated with public space, where the information shared reaches a large number of people (including platforms such as Facebook or Twitter), in the second case, we discuss platforms that could be closer to private space, where information is distributed individually or to small groups (such as Messenger, WhatsApp or Telegram). Each of them ensures the spread of messages both in the case of individual communication (person-to-person), but also for mass communication and mass self-communication (as we have already presented). One of the first ethical issues raised on these digital communication channels gives the need for such a distinction: how far is the responsibility of these platforms for the content distributed by their users? Moreover, the responsibility we are questioning is not only ethical, but also moral and legal. Thus, we can question the role of gatekeeper that we can assign to these platforms, especially when the intervention and solution of problems such as fake news, disinformation or propaganda spread through them are brought into question. On the other hand, we can note that the responsibility for spreading malicious messages in closed media lies directly with the individual transmitters, the liability of the platforms being somewhat limited. However, in the case of open media, one of the current issues is related to the way the information offered for consumption to their users is selected and ranked. Given the vast volume of information and the large number of active users on the platforms, algorithms were used for these processes of ranking and selection. Their

²⁴ Edson Tandoc, *Op. cit.*, pp. 35-46.

effectiveness is mainly challenged by the fact that a large number of users often read malicious information before being removed from the platforms. Ethics can be used in this sense, including in the process of creating algorithms, through what we could call ethical design²⁵. This is an ethical framework, where the other components of the digital communication ecosystem are evaluated, respectively the way in which the algorithm could influence them, directly or indirectly, manifestly or latently. However, it remains a goal to make this process more transparent, and even more, the criteria that channels use to rank posts in user feeds.

5. Receiver(s)

We mentioned above that the factors of the model proposed by Berlo for the source are the same as those for the receiver. On the other hand, the same communication theorist, David Berlo, observed that: "When we write, it is the reader who is important. When we speak, it is the listener who is important. This concern with the receiver is a guiding principle for any communication source. The receiver always has to be kept in mind when the source makes decisions with respect to each of the communication factors we have discussed"²⁶.

Of course, in the digital age, the receiver faces a strange phenomenon: the multitude of messages received, both in the public and in the private space, i.e. the *infodemic*²⁷. So how can digital ethics or applied ethics in the digital field meet such requirements? Because "our central ethical difficulties are difficult to a large extent because they require us first to determine which principles, values, frameworks, etc., in fact apply to a given problem - a determination that Aristotle famously associated with the capacity for practical judgment, or *phronesis*"²⁸. Charles Ess also noted that "developing such judgment requires nothing less than an ongoing

²⁵ Michael Kearns, Aaron Roth, *The Ethical Algorithm: The Science of Socially Aware Algorithm Design*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2020.

²⁶ David Berlo, *Op. cit.*, p. 52.

²⁷ Sergiu Bortoș, "Afecțiuni ale corpului social: fake news și infodemie" [Disorders of Social Body: Fake News and Infodemia], în Marius Stoian, Csibi Magor, Grațian Mihăilescu (eds.), *Caiet Documentar 5: Calitatea vieții. Tehnologie în retroumanism. Viitorul cu puterea comunităților*, București, Editura Club România, 2020, pp. 883-887.

²⁸ Charles Ess, *Digital Media Ethics*, Second Edition, Malden, Polity Press, 2014, p.199.

effort to analyze and reflect on both familiar and new experiences and problems”²⁹.

However, if we were to reflect on what it means to receive a message in the digital age and transpose the discussion into the area of ethics, we can take into account the fact that some authors consider digital ethics a subspecies of practical philosophy, as Matthias Rath states: “‘Ethics’ belong to the disciplines of so-called ‘practical philosophy’. This refers to those branches that deal with human practice, that is, human action”³⁰. On the other hand, given that “in a world that is mediatized to the core, communication ethics have a key function in the process of evaluating and assessing human behavior”³¹, we can say that the receiver of messages in the digital age is his own ethical advisor.

However, what does it mean that the receiver, who is a person, can be his/her own ethical advisor, and what is ethical counseling at this level of our research? Basically, ethical counseling is, as we have already seen, a kind of practical philosophy (or philosophical practice) and, in addition: “Beyond this, we have to recognize that there is an important part of ethics - taken in its holistic meaning, as moral philosophy - to be explored in the basic aretaic articulations; and merely thus, to ensure the use of the entire potential of such a practical philosophy, leading towards a *balanced life* for human beings.”³²

On the other hand, the receiver interprets the message from the perspective of his own cultural values and, therefore, “thanks to the *ethical counseling*, a person can find the support of (re)learning to self-govern by a better self-knowledge and comprehension of his/her needs, desires and abilities; first and foremost, activating and developing his/her *moral character*, and using it in addressing serious problems of living.”³³ In other

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p.199.

³⁰ Matthias Rath, “Media assessment: The future of media ethics”, in A. Schorr, W. Campbell, M. Schenk (Eds.), *Communication research and media science in Europe*, Berlin, Germany: Mouton de Gruyter, 2003, pp. 187–200, p.187.

³¹ Tobias Eberwein, Colin Porlezza, “Both Sides of the Story: Communication Ethics in Mediatized Worlds”, in *Journal of Communication*, 66(2), pp. 328-342, p. 328.

³² Carmen Cozma, “On Ethical Counseling”, in *Agathos*, Volume 12, Issue 1 (22), pp. 67-74, p. 68.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 73.

words, it is ultimately about how the receiver integrates and adapts in his/her own life the meaning of the message (of any kind) and because this requires an ethical analysis of the message, we are therefore talking about a kind of (self-)ethical counseling.

As such, it is important when we receive a message, in our position as receivers, we should not only understand it literally, but also put it through an ethical analysis: to ask ourselves whether it is good or bad, whether it is in accordance with our morals, if it's useful to our beliefs and skills in everyday life.

Conclusions, implications and recommendations

The objective of the present approach was to elaborate a short ethical analysis of how the communication process is carried out through the prism of the SMCR model initially elaborated by David Berlo. It is therefore a good opportunity to lay the foundations for future more extensive research on digital ethics. We refer especially to digital ethics, as in recent years it has become a useful tool for reflection on the morals involved in digital communication. As Berlo mentions, "the concept of interaction is central to an understanding of the concept of process in communication"³⁴, to which we can also mention the fact that the concept of ethics must be added to these two, because wherever there it has been social interaction between people, ethics has also existed, by all this implies, either we refer, as we have already shown, to its new subdomains, or we refer to general ethics as a theory of morality.

The main idea to highlight throughout the previous sections is the responsibility. In addition, we can ask for the last time in this paper, within the limits of the SMCR model, how exactly does this idea intervene in the communication process? In other words, how can we justify the need for responsibility in the act of communication in the digital space? This required a transdisciplinary approach, because Berlo's model explained to some extent the communication process, but communication did not consist only of the SMCR scheme and the adjacent factors.

At stake, ultimately, it is the moral integrity of the people and actors involved in this process. Therefore, a transdisciplinary attempt to show this requires a transposition in the field of ethics, and the latter, as we know, in turn requires more than only philosophical issues. Discussing

³⁴ David Berlo, *Op. cit.*, p. 130.

responsibility in the process of communication in the online environment, i.e. to lead the discussion in the field of ethics, means going through several areas of thinking and this is what we tried to do in this paper. Finally, arguing in favor of good morals in communication also means being responsible, and the responsibility for designing, transmitting, receiving and interpreting a message rests with all actors involved in the communication process.

Starting from these, we can affirm that our approach focused rather on a fragmented understanding of each party involved in the digital communication process, of each actor, but we did not exclude the complex interactions involved in communication. Therefore, we can develop recommendations for those interested in researching this topic in the future, to direct their analysis to the whole process of communication, respectively to understand how the interactions take place and which are the inter-influences between the actors involved, respectively their dynamics in digital communication.

Another recommendation would be to extend the analysis of digital communication to other models of communication, which involves another effort: updating the classic models to be suitable for the digital environment or even developing new explanatory models and inter- and trans-disciplinary analyzes in order to understand the many facets of communication in the digital space.

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