Society of the Missionaries of Africa

Ethical Guide to Social Networks

2022

INTRODUCTION

The whole new world of social media is in fact a new language for many of us and we are only too well aware that its use has greatly improved communication at all levels. For ourselves as missionaries we would dearly like it to become a tool for evangelisation for through it we have access to far more people in the digital world than in our physical neighbourhood. We have a high obligation to use social media with care and caution especially in community and also beyond when we are with other people. The risk with some of us in our use of the social media is that it can become so addictive. Some confreres are always looking at their phones, during meals, during meetings, during recreation, in fact their phone becomes almost part of them. When we fall prey to the unnecessary use of social media it can deprive us of our energy for more urgent matters, for community, for ministry, for prayer.

The aim of this excellent paper, written by our confrere Bernard Ugeux, is that we might reflect together as communities on how best to exercise personal responsibility in the use of social media. It is our hope as a council that together in our parish communities, in our formation communities, in our administrative communities we will be able to look at the issues involved. Let us remember that Social media used wisely is of tremendous value but virtual relationships will always be a poor substitute for real life friendships and community.

Rome, 8th March 2022

The General Council

The purpose of this ethical guide to social networks (1) is to encourage reflection on our use of social networks and the web, to suggest practical ways forward, without taking a dogmatic or moralistic stance.

The commitment of our Society

For us, Missionaries of Africa, it is important that an ethical guide be made available to our communities not only for the good of the communities themselves but also for our pastoral and professional commitments.

Our Society is concerned with helping everyone to develop ways which are respectful of oneself, of others and of the common good.

It also has an educational mission for its members and in the context of its commitments in the Church and in society. It will do this better by taking advantage of the opportunities offered by digital technologies. "This implies an ethical vigilance that requires new learning, not only on the technical level, but also on the level of our way of being" (2).

In such a context it is therefore important that we take the time to reflect on our use of social networks, on the Christian ways of being human, of acting out as human beings. There are many elements implicit in economic and technological development that influence our daily life and our way of consuming. All this must be looked at critically and discerned. Indeed, digital social networks are revealing ways of living together through the tools they put in place. They are based on certain intentions, sometimes political and economic, and certain models of society, often presented as obvious and universal, imposed on all cultures and beliefs.

A constructive attitude in the face of these challenges is to identify and analyse what values are at stake, in order to be able to affirm choices, a vision of man and society, in conformity with the Gospel. This code of ethics should help us to frame our practices so that they are consistent with our values and the charism of our Society.

Social networks: a new culture

The Interest of the Church

The last two Popes have shown concern about the consequences of the often anarchic development of social networks, which has far-reaching political and economic, as well as spiritual, consequences.

They consider that the techno-scientific progress in the field of communications has generated a new culture. Benedict XVI speaks of a vast cultural transformation in the way we know, learn and even think. Under certain conditions, they can contribute to satisfying the human being's desire for meaning, truth and unity. This evolution conditions today not only our way of communicating (by living constantly connected, in the immediacy of communication) but also scientific research and academic teaching. That is why he invites Christians to join with confidence and with conscious and responsible creativity in social networks. He specifies that this should not be only to satisfy a desire to be present but because "the network is an integral part of human life"(3).

Pope Francis underlines the displacements caused by the networks in our relationship to time (with acceleration), to space (which has taken on a global dimension, even concerning the common home), to the perception of oneself (cf. the narcissism of communicators), to others and to the world (in their diversity). It is a way of communicating, of learning, of being informed, of entering into relationships. All this is done by privileging the image over listening and reading. This has an important impact on the way of learning and on the development of a critical sense.

Some advantages and risks in the use of social networks.

Networking is an opportunity for the world and Africa because it allows the creation of global relationships and solidarity, scientific, intercultural and interreligious encounters, and artistic discoveries online. (4)

The dissemination of information (in real time) and knowledge via universities and virtual libraries and databases. Bringing families and communities together. Fostering international business and trade networks, and thus employment. To carry out actions for justice and peace on a global level, etc. It offers many women opportunities for

4

autonomy and empowerment that are unprecedented in their culture of origin. Finally, social networks offer many resources for spreading the Good News.

The risks, which also represent threats for African cultures, are: a world domination by a neo-liberal economy and finance for the benefit of the richest with too few means of regulation by the State. The digital world thus represents a "sixth continent" that has its own self-management and self-dissemination, propagating the domination of a supposedly global culture. The indiscriminate use of social networks can lead to addictions, narcissism and superficiality in relationships, deception through false identities, a lack of discernment in reading and disseminating information (*fake news*), aggressiveness in exchanges, racism, the spread of pornography (which is a perversion of sexuality). A waste of useless time in front of the screens and an external dependence (screen or phone always open), sometimes an obstacle to the spiritual and community life in congregations. There are mental health problems for children and youth addicted to video games. The ecological consequences are also worrisome. There is also the unchecked personal spending, political manipulation, loss of privacy, etc.

Human - and Christian - values affected by the new digital culture

Freedom: anyone can become an actor by registering on any network. One can intervene at any time in a personal or anonymous way. However, the networks constantly put us under a certain influence, if only by promoting a globalized culture presented as universal. To be free is to develop a critical conscience with regard to such influence, by informing oneself, training oneself and by making choices in one's participation in the networks (sites, mode of intervention, discretion).

Respect. The networks allow us to discover an extraordinary diversity, an opening to otherness. But they must not dehumanize the other person, whom we are called to respect in his personal, cultural and religious identity (5).

Commitment: It has become almost indispensable today to get involved to a certain extent in digital social networks if we do not want to be socially marginalized. But not in any way. "Personal and collective engagement implies a social vision that is based on

values of an increasingly connected humanity (6)", especially in an intercultural perspective.

Responsibility: Our word commits us, regardless of the medium through which it is expressed. It is therefore necessary to question our personal responsibility in speaking out, especially on these networks.

Interiority: Subjectivity and narcissism are very present on web 0.2. The need for interiority and personal space clashes with social networks that can develop superficiality, impatience and immediacy because of the abundance and acceleration of communications.

For a discernment of the use of digital social networks

When we talk about networks, we talk about relationships and therefore about different relationships with people and realities. In the light of the fundamental values that have just been mentioned, we will consider different relationships: the relationship to oneself, to others, to information, to time, to tools and to technology, all of which present ethical issues.

The relationship to oneself

This concerns *self-respect.* That is to say what we say and show about ourselves, the image we want to give of ourselves and the transparency of our identity, without forgetting the use of anonymity.

When we present our profile on a website or a network, what is the relationship between our lived reality and the virtual being we display? In what way do we really commit ourselves in what we affirm and transmit?

Are we capable of self-regulation? How do we live our freedom of expression, the quality of what we express, the relevance and coherence, but also the ability to stand back and listen?

Everyone has the right to publish what they want about their personal or professional life, but we should not forget that all this can be read by a large number of people, even those for whom it is not intended (7).

Discern before expressing yourself. Social networks promote freedom of expression and allow participation in the discussion on many subjects in a constructive and sometimes exciting way. But it is also the place where words, passions and sometimes aggression are unleashed at high speed, without us always having considered the consequences of our speaking out.

Communicating about oneself means making oneself vulnerable. Nowadays, our private life becomes more and more complex as it is no longer possible to control this personal information. There is also the risk that this information will be exploited via social networks for commercial or ideological purposes.

It is becoming very difficult to know who will have access to our profile or our messages, so that the boundary between private and public space is becoming increasingly blurred. We need to be very clear about this. Let's not forget that what we broadcast is recorded, stored and potentially usable or consultable by many people who are not concerned at first and can abuse it (8). It is therefore necessary to avoid any emotional or impulsive reaction before publishing. Be able to refrain and be discreet, especially when you are not necessarily competent.

We are committing more than ourselves. Such caution is even more important when one is a consecrated person or a member of a missionary society. We can commit the institution to which we belong without being aware of it. We can thus destabilize or even scandalize people who do not understand how someone who has a status in the Church can expose himself or express himself in this way.

The relationship with others

This concerns the private life of others. It is about respecting and understanding the limits of the other person's identity and accepting a refusal or opposition on their part. In order not to hurt or invade them, an effort of anticipation allows us to imagine the impact of what we say on the other person and to abstain if necessary.

How can we respect the other person? By being attentive to what we say and how we say it. Especially when we talk about him or her to others. Let's be careful to respect the limits of his or her sensitivity, and also his or her reputation. This may be a matter of

confidentiality. This issue is about the person's consent to what will be said about him or her. This implies good management of conversations and exchanges.

Freedom of expression does not exempt us from respecting others, especially when we talk about their culture or religion. Likewise, for people we don't know personally (strangers, political or public figures), let's treat them the same way we respect those close to us. Since interpersonal conversations are potentially visible to a large number of people, there is a risk of intervening in discussions that do not concern us, and sometimes in a disrespectful way.

We should avoid publishing elements about a person without asking for their agreement, without verifying their accuracy. Let's not forget that any nominative information about a person will become part of his digital identity.

A network is a group of people who share similar interests or commitments. The risk is to communicate only with people or networks similar to us without opening ourselves to those who have other points of view. Opening up to otherness requires a certain amount of courage. Algorithms make us go in circles and we lose the richness of the debate.

What place should we give to others? How can we ensure that social networks are not a factor of exclusion but rather of inclusion? Particularly for the African continent where access to web 0.2 or its networks is not general. It should not be the only way to communicate. There is a kind of "digital conformism" that is like a norm that everyone must accept: everyone should be permanently connected. This inevitably leads to exclusions, either because some people cannot afford it or because they do not want to conform to this norm.

On the subject of community life, it might be useful for our community project as Missionaries of Africa to discuss whether or not to use the phone or smartphone in community during meals, recreation, etc. Constantly being glued to the screen and not participating in the conversation, or suddenly leaving the room to answer a call in the middle of a fraternal exchange (9), can be perceived by others as a form of exclusion and disrespect.

The relationship to information and knowledge

Social networks represent a global forum where information and knowledge are constantly circulating. The question is to verify its origin, interest and accuracy.

We too introduce information, we share knowledge (in connection with our experience, our expertise, our pastoral and evangelization concerns) and we can therefore enrich the network community. Just as we can contaminate it with unverified, immoral or irrelevant information, content and positions.

Check the source! This should be our first reaction when we receive information or links to specialized sites on which we want to obtain knowledge.

It is desirable to share with others information or knowledge that we possess and that can enrich them. This applies both to academic research and publication work and to evangelization and training tools for the people with whom we work and collaborate. It is also useful for ongoing formation.

Beware of the quest for popularity. We are aware of the temptation to take the number of "likes" that register under our account as a criterion for the value of what we publish. There is a real temptation of narcissism. It is not the number of people who like us that counts but the value of what we transmit. Hence the importance of choosing the spaces and times when we introduce knowledge or information. It is through the quality of our contributions that we are useful to others.

What we put on the networks remains visible for a long time. It is therefore important not to hesitate to correct information.

Cite the source, cite the author, respect the law. Beware of copy and paste, whether it is on the web 0.2. for academic work or articles or on other networks. The more serious the citation of our sources, the more seriously our readers will take us. It is up to us to verify the source before transmitting any information, especially if it is sensitive and questions people.

Take distance and discern. It is not because a piece of information is sensational that it is true, it is not because it is important that it is urgent (make the difference!). It is important to analyse the material received before publishing a response or contribution.

Publishing or circulating information implies that we have the authorization to do so, especially in a professional or ecclesial context where confidentiality is an unavoidable rule.

The relationship to time

How to manage the time invested in social networks? This is one of the biggest challenges of networks. The time and energy we spend on them may well surprise us. People who study social networks as vectors of a new culture emphasize a change in the relationship to time. It seems to escape us and to be presented in an increasingly fragmented way. This has consequences on *"the way we learn and on the development of a critical sense"*, said Pope Francis in the introduction to this document.

Today, there is a *cyber-addiction* that poses problems for caregivers and parents, especially among adolescents. But it can also be found in clergy and in houses of religious formation. There are good tests that allow us to evaluate ourselves and to check to what extent we still retain our freedom with regard to being connected or not, for a longer or shorter period of time (10).

We can question ourselves on our capacity to disconnect for a more or less long time, to be able to take moments of solitude and even of boredom (fruitful for reflection…). Similarly, what is the relationship between our times spent glued to a screen and the time devoted to our personal and community spiritual life? Or to reading a serious book from cover to cover.

Are we still free? We sometimes function with several screens open at a time. The pressure of these, of alerts and notifications, makes our activities quite fragmented. We are constantly distracted from the work we are doing - sometimes even when we are welcoming people who need to be listened to from the heart. To the point where we are no longer in control of our time management. We lose our freedom, as if "someone" has virtually taken control of it.

Establish times to be disconnected. Social networks function in the immediacy of time, of the very short term and of immediate response, without us taking the time to distance ourselves from our feelings or emotions. Hence the importance of taking a step back to

read to the end, to understand and then to decide how to react. It is also a question of responsibility towards the recipient.

If we feel the need, we should not hesitate to remove notifications and alerts for applications for which we do not have immediate use. This will free our minds, and the minds of those who live with us, from beeps and unwanted vibrations.

The relationship to tools and technology

Social networks are tools that have been created with a human intention. Like any tool they are not neutral. They can foster the creation of a positively connected world, as well as seek to obtain ever more commercial or even political advantages, more or less disguised. We often don't know how our personal data and the data we enter on the networks are treated.

We have the power to spread the influence of the sites. By introducing links to a page of a site, we promote it through the algorithms of Google or other search engines. It is wise to learn about the services or applications we want to use, for what purpose they are offered. Just because they are free does not mean that there is no intention, on the contrary.

New technologies are constantly being proposed to us and we have to be vigilant about the communication of the actors of the web 0.2 economy. Concerning services, applications, and machines, it is good to be informed about the possibilities and limits set by the designers who risk to rip us off.

Concerning the introduction of links to another page, via our site, blog or social network account, as we reinforce its visibility often without being aware of it, it is important to question ourselves about the reliability and morality of the sites to which we refer.

For a Christian style of presence in the digital world

While inserting themselves into this new culture by using its tools, Christians (and believers of other religions) represent in certain aspects a "sign of contradiction" (Taizé). We have seen that the web and social networks are tempted to withdraw into the immediate, whereas a spiritual approach presupposes temporality, duration and

faithfulness. Moreover, the culture of globalization is marked by a relativism in individual options and by materialism and consumerism.

Pope Benedict XVI wrote: *"...there is a Christian style of presence also in the digital world:* it is characterized by a form of honest and open communication, responsible and respectful of the other. Communicating the Gospel through the new media means not only inserting openly religious content into the platforms of the various media, but also bearing witness with coherence in one's digital profile and in one's way of communicating, choices, preferences, judgments that are profoundly coherent with the Gospel, even when they are not explicitly mentioned (11)". As mentioned above, it reminds us that Christians do not have to seek popularity or sugar-coat a message in order to be appreciated, and that the truth of the Gospel is not an object of consumption or superficial enjoyment. It is an invitation to a personal response to hope, which Christians must give an account of and "incarnate in the real world" through the witness of their own lives (1 Pet 3:15). This must always complement the digital evangelization in which communities are invited to engage. This requires authenticity and coherence between the announcement and the way of life.

He also insisted on the need for creativity and professionalism of concrete communities in order to acquire consistency and audience in this unregulated digital forum where the worst sits alongside the best.

Pope Francis also invites us to ensure that involvement in social networks does not prevent us from meeting physical people in depth. In *Fratelli Tutti*, he writes about fraternity and social friendship: "Sitting down to listen to another person, a characteristic gesture of a human encounter, is a paradigm of a receptive attitude on the part of the one who overcomes narcissism and receives the other, pays attention to him, welcomes him into his own circle. But "the contemporary world is largely deaf. [...] Sometimes the speed of the modern world, the frenzy, prevents us from listening properly to what the other person is saying" (48). "The overwhelming accumulation of information that inundates us is not synonymous with more wisdom. Wisdom is not forged through anxious internet searches, nor is it forged through a wealth of information whose accuracy is not assured. Thus, it does not mature into an encounter with the truth. (...) *The problem is that a path of fraternity, local and universal, can only be travelled by free spirits ready for true encounters"* (50).

As Missionaries of Africa, we are faithful to the inspiration of our founder who exhorts us to make ourselves all things to all people by learning the language and culture of those who welcome us. Today, a new continent is emerging whose language is digital. We commit ourselves to learn this new language in the perspective of our mission of evangelization. Recognizing the advantages and the extraordinary potential of social networks to bring people together, to connect humanity to God through our evangelization activities and to promote dialogue and justice according to our charism, we venture with discernment into this new world that is capable of both good and bad.

Appendix

About cyberaddiction. Some questions for self-assessment.

Preliminary remark: When we talk about the internet, in the questions below, we also refer to smartphones including all social media (via Facebook, WhatsApp, Messenger, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, etc.).

1.   Do you spend more time connected on the internet than you initially thought?
2.   Does it bother you?
3.   Have any of your friends, family or community members complained?
4.   Do you find it difficult not to be connected for several days, perhaps several hours?
5.   Has your performance, the quality of your professional or apostolic work, or your personal (close) relationships suffered?
6.   Are there areas of the internet, particular sites that you cannot avoid (or abandon)?
7.   Do you find it difficult to control the impulse to buy products or services from the Internet?
8.   Have you tried, without success, to cut down on your use of the Internet?
9.   Do you lose a lot of investment and personal satisfaction because of the Internet?

P.S.: I would like to add an interesting exercise: over a day or a week, compare the time spent on the internet with the time spent in personal or community prayer, in spiritual reading or simply in a good and enriching book.

From 0 to 3 positive responses, there is a small tendency to become addicted to the internet.
Between 4 and 6 positive responses, there is a chance to develop this addictive behavior.
Between 7 and 9 positive responses, there is a strong tendency to become addicted. Danger.

<u>*Footnotes.*</u>

1. Some definitions according to Wikipedia: "Social media are web applications that allow the creation and publication of user-generated content and the development of online social networks by connecting user profiles. The term covers the various activities that integrate technology, social interaction, and content creation. Social media uses collective intelligence in the spirit of online collaboration. Through these means of social communication, individuals or groups of individuals form a social network, collaborate, create web content together, organise the content, index it, edit or comment on it, and combine it with personal creations.
2. Philippe Bordeyne, President of UDESCA (which brings together French Catholic Universities) in the editorial of the guide: For an ethical behaviour on the web and social networks, (2014), intended for Catholic Universities, from which I freely drew inspiration to write this document. I underline.
3. Pope Benedict VXI, "Truth, Proclamation and Authenticity of Life in the Digital Age", message for the 45th World Day of Social Communications, 24 January 2011.
4. Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Christus Vivit!* 25 March 2019, § 39, emphasis added.
5. Pope Francis, in *Fratelli tutti* (46) and *Gaudete et Exultate* (115) expresses his aversion to the fanaticism of some Catholic groups on the net.
6. UDESCA, op.cit, Paris, 2014, p. 6.
7. For example, someone looking for a job may be rejected because the potential employer has discovered unflattering information on Facebook that contradicts their CV.
8. We can keep our accounts private, for example by adjusting the privacy settings on Facebook can prevent someone from snooping on our profile without our permission. We also have a right to our image regardless of the medium or media involved. To remove content, the first thing to do is to contact the person who posted it. You can also contact the platform that hosts the content. Useful links: www.2025exmachina.net, www.jeunes.cnil.fr, www.internetsanscrainte.fr.
9. Unless you are a medical doctor on call.
10. See a test in the appendix below. It has been shown that by far the most visited sites are pornographic sites. No one is immune to this temptation. For some young people, it is the only place where they get "information" about sexuality.
11. Benoît XVI, art. cit. emphasis added.