

# Communication as ethical facilitator

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## Abstract

The purpose of the article is to offer a reflection on the ethical aspect of communication, more from a practised, experienced perspective than according to abstract models characterised by theoretical regulation and definition. Specifically, through references to the crisis of confidence that is currently sweeping Europe, it will attempt to show how communication can constitute a natural place for training and cooperative construction of new values and principles of ethical and moral regulation across the various fields of social activity, from the world of enterprise to that of institutions.

**Keywords:** ethics, transparency, communication, responsibility, cooperation

## Introduction

What relations exist between ethics and communication? How does the ethical dimension change when one goes from *theorised* to *applied* communication? Is it merely a question of professional ethics and regulation, or can the ethics of communication open up questions of a different significance?

Answering these questions, without a doubt, requires a reflection of a theoretical nature. Yet such a reflection, at least in this case, needs to start out from the concrete experience of the praxis of communication, in particular communication as it manifests itself in that wholly peculiar field that is comprised by the institutional sphere and Public Administration, where the requirement for ethics is a constituent and not merely an incidental element.

Nevertheless, today we find ourselves – in Europe in general but in Italy in particular – in a paradoxical situation, in which in the public sphere the ethical dimension seems to be at once a necessary, indispensable condition at the theoretical level, yet unrealised or in any case essentially deprived of power at the practical level. In other terms, there is a strong “desire” for ethics, powerfully expressed and driven by public opinion, which is increasingly dominated by the social and existential uncertainties of which Zygmunt Bauman (2009) has been telling us for some time; and in any case, such a desire seems to be born precisely from the establishment of a widespread dispersion of ethics itself, if not its complete annihilation.

Communication, at this intersection between desires and frustrations, can and must carve out a specific role, which is not limited to seeing communication as the *object* of

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deontological rules and specific ethics, but which recognises it as a *tool* for activating and guaranteeing an ethical dimension in every field of activity.

What changes, in short, is the question to be asked of communication: no longer (or at least not only) “What must communication do and what must it be like in order to be good, correct communication?”, but also (and above all) “How can communication help to ensure an ethical foundation and regulation in any field of social and cultural activity?”

In short, it is necessary – and this, essentially, is my hypothesis – to move from ethics as a guarantee of good communication to good communication as an ethical guarantee in itself.

Redefined thus, the ethical function of communication necessarily *crosses* the various disciplines and aspects of social living, from the institutional to the legal sphere, from the media to the economic stage, even stretching to the dynamics and role of religious organisations, which today more than ever before are called upon not so much to rethink their own principles as to represent and divulge them.

In this sense, practised communication, as a result of its typically relational basis, constitutes a formidable field of experimentation and calibration, if not a veritable training ground for developing and sharing moral principles, values and sentiments.

It is here that the entire generative force of communication as a non-reflexive, autarchic process, yet consistently producing new models of interaction and interpretation of the existing, is perceived. Indeed, as Luca Toschi writes:

Communication gives stabilising, conservative force, seems ever more “contaminated”, albeit often involuntarily, by processes of cognition and inquiry, and is gradually revealing potential [...] divergent from the dominant grammars, potential for destabilisation, for feedback that is so strong that it shakes the foundations of the current system and lays the ground for a new one. [...]

The most innovative feature of everything that is happening would seem to be the end of a view of communication seen merely as an overcoming of man’s spatio-temporal limits, as a tool for vanquishing them, in favour of communication seen as a force that is capable of generating subjects and objects.<sup>2</sup>

In order to take this concept to extremes, it is necessary to imagine communication as a substratum of “cultivation” of ethical attitudes and principles and thus redefine its role within the social field in terms of a kind of “catalyser” or facilitator in processes of creation and stabilisation of “good practices”: good, however – and herein lies the

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<sup>2</sup> Toschi 2011 : 16, 46 translated by the author

great difference compared with past models of *empowerment* – not only in terms of efficiency and effectiveness, but also in terms of ethical and deontological coherence.

This nevertheless essentially requires a slight shift in viewpoint, which once again places ethics as an abstract dimension with the moral as an interactional, lived dimension, as it is above all at this level that communication can help in its specific processes and translate into rules and procedures for transparency.

Such a change in perspective ends up being synthesised in the concept – perhaps abused but precisely for this reason deserving of further consideration – of *transparency*. However, we shall proceed one thing at a time.

### **A lived ethics**

The search for an ethical interpretation of communication begins essentially with an observation that is less banal than it appears. When one speaks of ethics, one tends to think in normative, prescriptive terms, and thus from an abstract, conceptual point of view. Ethics is a system of prescriptions, derived and deduced from a number of fundamental principles, however variable they may be depending on the periods, societies and cultures in question. Yet, as we are reminded by the moral imperative of Immanuel Kant – who in his *Critique of Pure Reason* claims that ethics is the answer to the question “What must I do?” – ethics is evidently something more than a series of norms: it is not just a category of thought, but a dimension of existence.

I believe that in order to best understand ethics in this sense of the word it is necessary to shift from a conceptual dimension to an emotional, “lived” one. The question of ethics, in fact, can be dealt with in several ways. However, it can also be *lived* in several ways.

Listening to and reading the (political, journalistic, common-sense) discourses that have multiplied around this topic in recent times, it is easy to realise that one of the greatest differences that exist today between our “old Europe” and developing countries lies herein, in the way we live the ethical dimension, at an almost sentimental level, as a “strong”, non-negotiable need, a need which we lost for a time and are now seeking to reclaim, yet the importance of which has always been clear and unquestionable to us.

It is from here, from this “feeling” of ethics, that the growing attention and sensitivity to the subject of responsibility on the part of institutions probably stems: a subject which is closely tied to the subject of ethics and which in the Italian context is a veritable exposed nerve. In a country such as ours, which sees itself as being in sharp decline and is attempting to pull itself back up again, the burden of the failure of responsibility in fact falls mainly upon the older generations.

Then again, the subject of generations is without a doubt one of the pivotal points of the moral debate that is currently sweeping Europe, in every area and in every country, albeit to varying extents. As expert in business ethics Nils Ole Oermann pointed out during a conference recently held in Pescara, responsibility should be considered above all in relation to those who will follow us. Responsibility means being able to think about the consequences of one's own choices and actions, not only in the immediate circumstances, the *hic et nunc*, but also in the long term, with a broader perspective. A case in point is the ethical principle of "sustainability", a rather fashionable term, communicatively speaking, precisely because of its intrinsically ethical value. As Oermann says:

I discovered, somewhat to my surprise, that the origin of the term "sustainability" can be traced to the forestry context, and more specifically to the forest economy. In the 19th century Saxony was one of Germany's main mining areas. However, silver mining operations were leading to the systematic destruction of the surrounding woods. The person in charge of mining, Captain Von Carlowitz, who was also a *government officer*, objected to this manner of proceeding, explaining that in the long term it would lead to major problems not only for the environment but also to the mining activity itself and the welfare of the local population. Uncontrolled deforestation was, in short, a damaging activity first of all for enterprise. Still today, in Saxony, it is possible to appreciate the effects of this affirmation in the perfect state of conservation of the woods, which has also made it possible to keep the forest economy active.

Being sustainable therefore means being courageous, answering to the risks that one runs. And it means considering oneself a part of a chain of generations, a link between those who come before us and those who will come after us.<sup>3</sup>

This is also what I mean by "lived ethics": placing responsibility along an intergenerational line and within an intergenerational vision enables us to regard ethics as a value to be passed down from generation to generation, one which is reproducible through the mechanism of example rather than through indoctrination and being imposed in a top-down manner. In this way it is indeed possible to recognise in ethics a dimension to be lived and experience, which as such must be communicated. And this holds true for the private as well as the public sphere, for professional histories as well as for those of enterprises.

Good communication is the necessary condition for these principles and sentiments to be conveyed effectively and productively. In this sense, transparency does not mean merely the absence of obstacles to understanding or to access to information. It also implies clarity of intentions and objectives. Transparency, like ethics, is also something that must be felt in communication: it is not merely a formal requirement

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<sup>3</sup> Oermann 2012 : 11-12, translated by the author

– completeness of information, comprehensibility, accessibility – but an essential one, too, the perception of a pact of trust between “speaker” and “listener”.

Yet the latter attribute is something that emerges not so much from compliance with functional rules – however essential these are to anyone wishing to practise good communication – as from communication’s ability to place itself at the centre of an interdisciplinary, inter-subjective field so as to increase, first of all, the degree of understanding of the phenomena which one subsequently intends to communicate. And only by taking part in these phenomena is it possible to achieve this type of understanding and generative force.

### **A transversal dimension**

This is why the ethics of communication not only can, but must, be transversal. Today, at such an important moment for Europe, it is thus imperative to attempt to break out of the confines of one’s own sector and have the courage to place oneself in the middle of a crossroads, at the point where not only the lives and vicissitudes of past and present entrepreneurs meet, but also the choices of the institutions and citizens to the last few decades, in search of a concept of ethics – including professional ethics – which is not monocular but which springs from a transversal, multi-perspective dimension, from the totality of these competences and experiences.

The adoption of a historical perspective can assist greatly in this process. There is no doubt, in fact, that those who did business in the 1930s were contending with not just a completely different technical and cultural situation, but also a completely different competitive arena. Nowadays, making a product, providing a service or undertaking a project means dealing with a system of timescales and risks that are much tighter and more pressing, albeit more engaging for that very reason.

Indeed, Old Europe means above all dealing with a socio-economic system shaped by the complex interaction of many superstructures which stem from a specific historical process and which without a doubt constitute a legacy that must not be disposed of, a past legacy which however needs to be converted into a deposit on which to draw for the future, if we do not want it to become a resistance, an obstacle in relation to the global challenges that await us.

Speaking of ethics, therefore, means on the one hand retrieving a sense of responsibility tailored towards the future, and on the other acting in the present, rebuilding and returning to new generations the keys to interpreting a shared moral code which perhaps we have lost or at least risked losing. Clear criteria, sharp distinctions are required; it is imperative that we regain our ability to say what is ethical and what is not, although often the dividing line between the two judgements is often not easy to grasp.

In this respect, a crucial dimension of ethics is found in courage. Which is courage to decide, to take the initiative and potentially to make mistakes, too, provided that this is done with responsibility. Indeed, it is possible not to be ethical on a formal level, but to act in the right way on the concrete level. And this is true for enterprises, above all in terms of wealth creation and cultural stimulation, as it is for institutions.

Let us take the highly significant case of contemporary Germany, which today constitutes perhaps the most interesting observatory on the process of the moralisation of Europe that we are witnessing. It is no coincidence that this moralisation is directed first of all at Member States and finds Germany in a position that is twofold and complex, as the promoter of this new “state ethics” yet itself part of that model of Old Europe which is attempting to renew itself precisely through a rediscovery of ethics.

A communicative courage also clearly exists, one which can help to reduce – albeit not eliminate entirely – margins of error, or at least to reduce ambiguities such as the one in which – in some respects against its will – Germany finds itself, and by extension the whole of Europe. Communicative courage means, for example, taking up the challenge of helping to bring into contact and dialogue with one another not only the various active components of a Country – the public and private sphere, enterprises, citizens, institutions and research, in accordance with that model of *big society* which is being imported with great difficulty into more static contexts such as Italy (*cfr.* Rolando : 2010) – but also the institutions and publics of different Countries.

Succeeding in building communicative platforms that are able to break down the horizontal barriers between these actors: this, too, is transparency.

## Conclusions

Yet in the final analysis, how does one achieve that role of ethical facilitator for “new communication” which we envisaged and embraced at the beginning?

Once the context in which this model must be established has been defined – a transversal context both in terms of generations and sectors – as well as the qualities that it must be able to ensure and bring out in the very communication itself between partners, such as responsibility, courage and the sentiment of transparency, the problem remains of how to concretely translate this ideal picture into strategies and processes for effective communication. In other terms: if this is the direction and this is the “load” that it is necessary to carry, along what kind of tracks must we proceed?

An answer – albeit partial – is provided by Zygmunt Bauman, who in his *lectio magistralis* during the International Communication Summit held in Rome in October 2011, identified, as a possible way out of the crisis of uncertainty that besets present-

day society, the gradual adoption of the model that Richard Sennett (2012), one of the most brilliant contemporary sociologists, calls “informal open-ended cooperation”. As Bauman explains:

Once again we have a formula with three terms, which refers to something more than mere dialogue. What exactly does “informal” mean? It means that one may access this cooperation without pre-established rules, since rules regarding how cooperation should proceed are the very stakes of the process itself and are bound to emerge from its course. Similarly, “open” means that one does not enter into cooperation convinced that one is right and that the others are wrong, so that the sole scope of the dialogue is to prove others wrong and oneself right. On the contrary, one agrees to take part in cooperation by means of a dual role: that of the teacher and that of the pupil, aware of being there not only to teach, but also to learn. And lastly, cooperation, which does not mean denying the dimension of debate and discussion, but merely establishing that the purpose of dialogue is not to divide cooperating parties into victors and vanquished, benefiting one group rather than the other, but rather to have both parties win, so that everybody gains from it.<sup>4</sup>

This is an extremely useful account of the form which ethical communication should take, not in a merely superficial sense, but in a deep, functional sense too. A model that places at the centre a cooperation scheme which is horizontal and well distributed among the various actors illustrates well what was stated at the outset: that ethical communication stems from concrete lived experience, and that transparency is not only the breaking down of “vertical” obstacles by those who possess the information and those who are called upon to access it, but is also the elimination of barriers to understanding and sharing between actors, each of them bringing a part of the information, a part of development, and potentially a different yet equally important perspective on the welfare of the community.

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