

# Popes in Digital Era

## Reflecting on the Rise of the Digital Papacy

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### Abstract

Some have suggested the current papal office represents a newly evolved, digital literate and media engaged entity. This has led to framing the current curia as a «digital papacy». Under the oversight of Pope Francis the Internet now plays a vital role, not only in facilitating the dissemination of religious information and teachings for the Catholic church, but in how it seeks to represent itself in a globally networked world. Since the instillation of Pope Francis, the Roman curia of the Catholic Church has increasingly embraced social media, like Instagram and Twitter, as resources for spiritual and informational dissemination. The further refining of digital resources such as Vatican.va, have been credited to raising the prominence of Pope Francis' digital profile. Pope Francis' re-working of the Curia Communication Offices and structures also shows his close attention to the role media plays in the Church. Such innovation have been credited with the creation of a digital papacy, where the papal office is shown as being more seriously invested and strategically aware of how new media technologies can and should be leveraged for religious purpose for the sake of the Church's mission. However, this paper seeks to investigate the claim that the current papal office has indeed institute a new approach to media in a digital age, and interrogate the claim that a unique digital papacy currently exists. By comparing Pope Francis' media use and strategies to that of the two previous papal office we begin to see that the papal office does now exist and function within a unique media moment – readily embracing digital media – and it takes part of a longer historic trajectory of media use and understanding in the Vatican. In this paper we argue that while the current media work of Pope Francis can be described as

a digital papacy, it is only because of the way it emulates and operates within a broader theological strategy grounded in six or more decades of theological teaching on Social Communication within the Church.

*Keywords:* Digital Religions, Pope Francis, Catholic Church, Media, Internet

## Introduction

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The idea of a digital papacy existing was first suggest by news reports in September 2015, surrounding Pope Francis when he visited the USA for the first time of his papacy. During his visit, many Internet memes were created and circulated on the Internet and social media used to frame public response to the new pope and his role in a digital area<sup>1</sup>.

These Internet memes, typically composed of a popular culture image with a humorous slogan or quote, became concise ways to sum up American public perceptions of the new Pope. These were easily copied, remixed and spread over social media (Spadaro 2017).

Prominent memes included an image from the movie *Zoolander* with one of the characters proclaiming the phrase: «That Pope Francis, he's so hot right now» (see Fig. 1) referencing the celebrity like status of the Pope and the welcoming he received. Another meme featured a photo from *Time magazine* of the Pope being driven through the streets of New York, his papal gown flapping in the wind, with the slogan «Like a Boss» (see Fig. 2). A further example showed a photo of the Pope speaking at a public outdoor mass with his hand to his ear and the phrase: «I'm sorry did you say, the Church is dwindling? I couldn't hear you over 1.2 Billion Catholics» (see Fig. 3), referencing the Catholic Church's projected global membership. By combining provocative quotes with easily recognizable popular culture references or media photos, memes help communicate commonly held perceptions and value judgements, not only about the character of the Pope, but they also displayed popular culture and media views of the Catholic Church in an increasingly digitally driven culture.

<sup>1</sup> See *MC Francis: Pope's Hip-Hop Pose Inspires #popebars Internet Meme*, in «The Guardian» (2015), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/01/pope-francis-hip-hop-rapper-microphone-meme>.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

Scholars have argued that Pope Francis has become an icon in this cultural context, the spread of his image and quotes have been pervasive in the Internet's culture (Allen, San Martin 2017). This has also garnered him many nicknames to describe the Pope's status in popular culture including the «Internet Pope», the «Tweeting Pope» and the «Digital Pope» because of the pervasiveness of his images being shared online and the viral nature of his quotes (Guzek 2015). However, this article seeks to interrogate these claims and puts forward the assertion that Pope Francis can only be described as a «digital Pope» because he is situated in an important progression of media teachings. We argue that the teachings and work of the papacies of Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI created a trajectory of media advocacy and framing strategies that have laid the groundwork for Pope Francis to become a «Digital Pope» (Campbell 2010b). By exploring the flourishing of Church teaching on social communication and media use we are able to explore these interesting developments and the media status of the Papal office today.

## Methodology

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This research study is based on the thematic analysis of core documents related to the Vatican focused on themes of the Church, Media and Communication. The aim was to investigate the narratives surrounding Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict and Pope Francis and their relationship with and responses to digital technology and the Internet. This involved a review of two sets of documents. First, a review of documents produced by the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, dealing with theological commentary on communication technology and documents related to the Internet. This was done in order to provide an assessment of official Catholic views of media, as advocated by the Papal office at a given time period. This provided details enabling us to outline dominant Church views of digital technology from general commentary on the digital era in these texts.

Second, all the transcripts from sermons/speeches given by each of the three popes on World Communications Day were reviewed. Here special attention was given to how each Pope described digital media in both theological and instrumental terms, which forms of

digital media they cited as exemplars (i.e. Internet, social media, etc.) and specific instructions given regarding the ethical use of these different forms of media. This information enable us to create a profile of each Pope regarding the type of media they highlighted and kinds of theological and ethical assessments they make regarding these. Finally, the three digital profiles constructed and presented in the latter half of the article have been supported throughout all the paper with the use of emblematic memes which exemplify their social perception.

### Framing Catholic Church Approach to Media

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We can't understand digital media and the Church's response to the Internet if we don't look back at its communication philosophy and its communication theology (Marchetti 2015); here the starting point is the Pontifical Council for Social Communications. This is an important institution, part of the Vatican Curia, founded in 1948 and originally set up by Pope Pius XII to look at the medium of film. It was originally called the Pontifical Commission for the Study and Ecclesiastical Evaluation of Films on Religious or Moral Subjects and it was shortened a year later to the Pontifical Commission for Educational Religious Films (Melloni 1998).

Pope Pius XII recognized that films were emerging in popular culture on a global scale as an artistic and communication field and he was concerned about how cinema might: «influence in the thinking, the habits, the life of the countries where it develops its power – particularly among the poorest classes»<sup>2</sup>. He argued that there was a need for the proper theological study of cinema.

In 1955, in the Apostolic Exhortations *The Ideal Film*, Pius XII affirms: «The Church welcomes technological progress and receives it with love, for it is an indubitable fact that technological progress comes from God and therefore can, and must, lead to Him»<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> See *Apostolic Exhortations of His Holiness Pius XII to Representatives of the Cinema World*: [http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_p-xii\\_exh\\_25101955\\_ideal-film.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-xii_exh_25101955_ideal-film.html).

<sup>3</sup> See *Apostolic Exhortations of His Holiness Pius XII to Representatives of the Cinema World*: [http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/it/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_p-xii\\_exh\\_25101955\\_ideal-film.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/it/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-xii_exh_25101955_ideal-film.html).

By 1964 the Pontifical Council was renamed the Pontifical Council for Social Communications (PCSC) precisely because the world was entering in the new era of cinema and television. This new re-numeration described itself as dealing with the problems and opportunities raised by these media as well as the daily and periodical press in relation to the interest of the Catholic religion. The aim of the Pontifical Council was then to address *social communications* issues (Ruozzi 2015).

In this context social communication became important because this was no longer only a practical concept but also a theological construct. Indeed with the constitution of PCSC the Catholic Church aimed to address the challenges and the opportunities proposed by the development of communication technologies as a social process with ethical implications. Information communication technologies are finally conceived in a space that affects all humanity no matter their class, no matter their ethnicity nor the space that they occupy (Zizola 1996).

Over the last sixty to seventy years, the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, has contribute to innovation of the Church itself, but probably its key contribution are the eleven papal documents or decrees that it has put out. In some cases, these documents on communication have been media specific, like *Ethics in Advertising*<sup>4</sup> which came out in 1997, or the most recent documents as *The Church and the Internet*<sup>5</sup> and *Ethics in Internet*<sup>6</sup> which came out in 2002. Arguably, the most important document that was put out was *Communio et Progressio* (1971) which is a document with strong connections to the Second Vatican Council and was an interlude of a series of intense theological discussions (Baragli 2019).

The Second Vatican Council was really concerned with how the Church should monitor the use of media to see what effect it was having on the spiritual wellbeing of the Church, as well the potential spiritual harm or advantages that media could bring to the community of believers (Zizola 2019).

<sup>4</sup> See PCSC, *Ethics in Advertising*: [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/pccs/documents/rc\\_pc\\_pccs\\_doc\\_22021997\\_ethics-in-ad\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_22021997_ethics-in-ad_en.html).

<sup>5</sup> See PCSC, *The Church and the Internet*: [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/pccs/documents/rc\\_pc\\_pccs\\_doc\\_20020228\\_church-internet\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20020228_church-internet_en.html).

<sup>6</sup> See PCSC, *Ethics in Internet*: [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/pccs/documents/rc\\_pc\\_pccs\\_doc\\_20020228\\_ethics-internet\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20020228_ethics-internet_en.html).

*Communio et Progressio*'s main aim was to look at issues of social justice and media as God given and what it provides is not only a practical guide of how Catholics should present the media, but also how teasing out some of the core theological claims of the Catholic church understandings of media.

One of its most relevant aspects is that the Church sees media as gifts of God and Christ is revealed as a perfect communicator, so we have been given a model of communication to look at his practical and rhetorical style. The argument, first and foremost, is that media and communication tools should be about bringing equality to people and about fairness and justice, and this perspective perfectly tying into the social justice doctrine of the Catholic Church. Moreover, modern media offers a new way of confronting people with the Gospel, and for this reason one of the primary ways we should use media is for evangelism and mission. Lastly, we use media to serve both the progress of man and the glory of God. Here it is evident the twofold role of media: one for evangelical mission and the other one as a tool to promote human justice or affirmation of human dignity (Sozzi 2009).

From the *Communio et Progressio* and the work of the Pontifical Council, we see also the emergence of World Communications Day (WCD) which was established in 1967 by Pope Paul VI. Pope's aim was to give a speech on whatever media are for that year and focusing on how they affect the Church. With the World Communications Day the Church really tried to draw attention into how communication media can be key to cultural transformation and its impact upon the Church, similarly, the Church's impact then upon culture (De Giorgi 2015).

In conclusion considering the Pontifical Council as an instrument that provides a theological and practical training for the Church – laid out by a clear theological document, *Communio et Progressio* – and the World Communications Day as a place for the Pope to speak in and about media culture, we can now begin to look at the impact on media of the last three popes and what they represent for the media age.

## Digital Papacy as a Technological & Theological Legacy

The emerging of *digital papacy* and the influence of each of the preceding popes could be summed up by another popular Internet meme that surfaced during the 2015 Papal visit to the US. The meme showed images of the last three Popes with a single word describing the popular perceptions of the character of each pontifex. The first image of John Paul the Second is overlaid with the word «Hope». Then image of Benedict bears the word «Faith» and over the image of Francis is the word «Charity» (see Fig. 4). This pays homage to the scripture from 1 Corinthians 13 which states: «For now there abides faith, hope and charity. But the greatest of these is charity». These words can be seen as summations of the perceived contributions of each Pope to the Papal office. In this section, we use this meme as a framing narrative to introduce popular perception of each of the three papal office. This sets the stage for later discussions of the media strategies embraced by each papal office.



Fig. 4

It has been argued that Pope John Paul II was seen as a globalizing Pope, one able to connect different arenas of the Church in an apostolic way, and taking on the role of a preacher offering hope to a struggling Church and world (Gonzalez 2009). This is summed up by the



meme which represents the last three popes and below Wojtyła's Picture appears the sentences «this is what we believe» (see Fig. 5). This global perspective explains also why Pope John Paul II recognized the importance of the Internet as a tool for social communications for the Church.

In 1986, in the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, he speaks directly to the role of priests and the growing number of social communication technologies:

Future priests should be trained in the seminary in the correct use of these instruments. This provision had a threefold purpose, namely, that the seminarians might impose discipline on their own personal use of the media, that they might be able to train the faithful in their turn to exercise similar self-discipline, and that they might learn how to use the media in their own apostolate<sup>7</sup>.

In 1989 during the World Communications Day, Pope John Paul II also stated: «The Church must learn to cope with computer culture»<sup>8</sup>, and then in 1996 the Vatican started its first web site.

Pope Benedict earned a reputation of being an astute though dense theologian, committed to thinking deeply about church doctrines (O'Mahony 2009).

Benedict can be framed as a man of Faith, as a theologian and an explainer; he is associated in this meme with the quote «this is why we believe» (see Fig. 5). During his papacy, Benedict promoted social media use and literacy for church clergy, and for religious education and teaching. During the years of his papacy Benedict dedicated his message for the World Communications Day to *New Technologies, New Relationships: Promoting a Culture of Respect, Dialogue and Friendship*<sup>9</sup> (2009), to *The Priest and Pastoral Ministry in a Digital World: New Media at the Service of the Word*<sup>10</sup> (2010), and to the *Social*

<sup>7</sup> See Congregation for Catholic Education, *Guide to the Training of Future Priests Concerning the Instruments of Social Communications*: [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/pccs/documents/rc\\_pc\\_pccs\\_doc\\_19031986\\_guide-for-future-priests\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_19031986_guide-for-future-priests_en.html).

<sup>8</sup> See *Religion in the Mass Media*: [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/communications/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_24011989\\_world-communications-day.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_24011989_world-communications-day.html)

<sup>9</sup> See *New Technologies, New Relationships. Promoting a Culture of Respect, Dialogue and Friendship*. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_mes\\_20090124\\_43rd-world-communications-day.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20090124_43rd-world-communications-day.html).

<sup>10</sup> See *The Priest and Pastoral Ministry in a Digital World: New Media at the Service of the Word* [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_mes\\_20100124\\_44th-world-communications-day.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20100124_44th-world-communications-day.html).

*Networks: Portals of Truth and Faith; New Spaces for Evangelization*<sup>11</sup> (2013). Here Pope Benedict directly spoke about social network sites, stating: «Believers are increasingly aware that, unless the Good News is made known also in the digital world, it may be absent in the experience of many people for whom this existential space is important. The digital environment is not a parallel or purely virtual world, but is a part of the daily experience of many people».

Without forgetting that just the previous year, the Vatican launched the first Twitter account, *@Pontifex*.

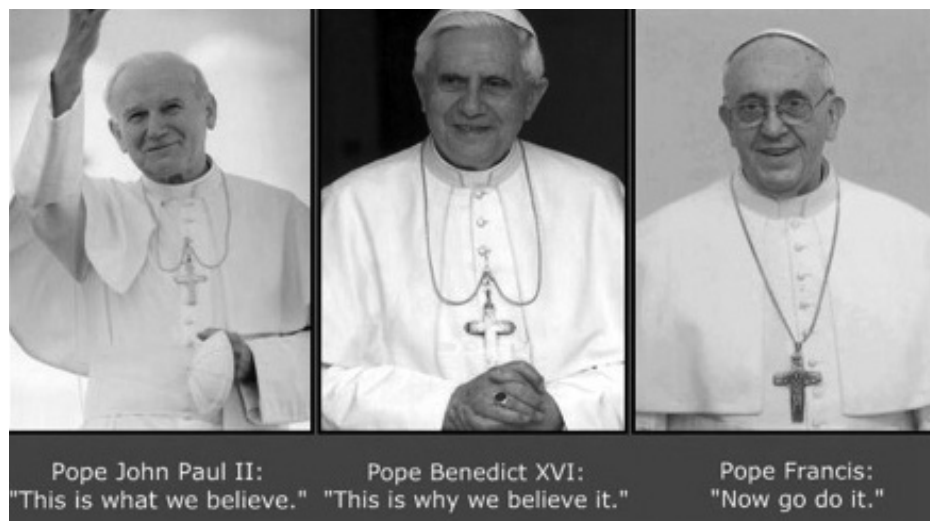


Fig. 5

Pope Francis, in his papacy is seen as taking on the role of the shepherd, calling people not to just know but «now go do it» as the meme charges (see Fig. 5). He represents the pastoral role and calling others to act out their faith in the world today (Ivereigh 2014). In the next paragraphs, we will enter more in detail on the practical and theological aspects which characterized Pope Francis approach to digital media. For the moment we argue these characterizations of each Pope – as seen in these Internet memes – also represent their approaches

<sup>11</sup> See *Social Networks: portals of truth and faith; new spaces for evangelization* [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_mes\\_20130124\\_47th-world-communications-day.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20130124_47th-world-communications-day.html).

to the dominant digital communication platforms emerging within the era of their papacies' and how they chose to engage with them. Starting from this point, this article suggests three papacies can be described as follows: John Paul II-The texting Pope, Benedict-the tweeting pope and Francis as the selfie Pope. Each of these characterizations are building on and from a longer history of the Catholic Church's engagement and theological reflection on media technologies and especially on the current era of digital media (Narbona 2016).

However, before we can look at each of these papacies we need to look to the history of the Church's stance and reaction to media. We can't understand the Church's response to digital media if we do not first consider its communication philosophy and policies, as well as its theology of communication.

### John Paul: The Internet-Texting Pope

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Here above we suggested that John Paul II, can be described as the «Internet/Texting Pope», because of the global reach and impact of his papacy. Pope John Paul II came into the papacy in 20<sup>th</sup> century, and grew alongside the phenomena of the 24-hour news cycle and 24-hour news coverage, so he had to adapt the Church's message to this new media environment and learn how to use new technologies (Anyidoho 2016). One of his attempts to address the rise of computer culture alongside mass media driven society was through his World Communications speech, in 1990, where he talks about the *Christian Message in Computer Culture*<sup>12</sup>.

Here the Vatican begins to realize that computers are not just becoming tools of the work place but they are involved also into business, education, and overall they have a strong impact on culture as a whole. The Church needed to understand how people view these new tools and technology, to figure out where the Church needs to communicate with the public (Zizola 1996). In 1996, Pope John Paul was a key actor in helping to get the first Vatican website. The Internet was quickly seen by the papal office and the Church as a new tool

<sup>12</sup> See *Christian Message in Computer Culture* [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/communications/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_24011990\\_world-communications-day.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_24011990_world-communications-day.html)

for proclaiming the Gospel<sup>13</sup>. The Pope was also influential in talking about *The Church and the Internet* (2002)<sup>14</sup> and on the *Ethics in the Internet* (2002)<sup>15</sup>. In the first document, he discusses how the Church should respond to the Internet and really picks up on the second half of *Communio et Progressio* offering guidance on how Catholics should position themselves in new media and how they should see their role as representatives of the Church (Zsupan-Jerome 2019). The second document *Ethics of the Internet* was a broader separate document that was really addressed to the outsiders of the church and it implores that government officials, countries, and societies as a whole should use the Internet in a way that encourages communication, rather than ghettoizing or separating the people of contemporary culture.

Having this global apostolic role, John Paul embraces this new global networking capability, seeing the Catholic Church as a hub for which information can be spread, and grasps onto it as facilitating that process. In 1999, during the 33<sup>rd</sup> World Communications Day, John Paul said a notable quote: «Technology that pollutes can also cleanse, production that amasses can also distribute justly, on condition that the ethic of respect for life and human dignity, for the rights of today's generations and those to come, prevails»<sup>16</sup>.

So again, while he offered some practical advice, he is really focusing on the heart of the *Communio et Progressio* and the idea that communication should bring about human justice and equality. Also technology should be something that people can have free and open access, and the Church should teach them the best model of good communication practices (Shields 2008).

<sup>13</sup> See PCCS: *Guide to the Training of Future Priests Concerning the Instruments of Social Communications* (1986) [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/pccs/documents/rc\\_pc\\_pccs\\_doc\\_19031986\\_guide-for-future-priests\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_19031986_guide-for-future-priests_en.html).

<sup>14</sup> *The Church and the Internet* [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/pccs/documents/rc\\_pc\\_pccs\\_doc\\_20020228\\_church-internet\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20020228_church-internet_en.html).

<sup>15</sup> *Ethics in the Internet* [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/pccs/documents/rc\\_pc\\_pccs\\_doc\\_20020228\\_ethics-internet\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20020228_ethics-internet_en.html).

<sup>16</sup> *Mass Media: A Friendly Companion for Those in Search of the Father*, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/communications/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_24011999\\_world-communications-day.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_24011999_world-communications-day.html).

## Benedict: The Tweeting Pope

As mentioned before, Pope Benedict was a firm embracer of technology as we see from the inauguration of the Pope's Twitter account. Especially for this reason, we have described him as the «Tweeting Pope». In his short papacy, Benedict understood the need for the Church to embrace even more new technologies, as he announced in 2009, during the 43<sup>rd</sup> World Communications Day in his speech *New Technologies and Relationships: Promoting a Culture of Respect, Dialogue, and Friendship*<sup>17</sup>. With this discourse, Benedict was actually asking a lot of hard questions about the impact of technology and society. He was really trying to push the Church to think ethically about the impact of technologies and how the relationships to one another, and especially the relationship to pastoral care, have been affected.

As he notes in the World Communications Day speech in 2010, *The Priest and Pastoral Ministry in a Digital World: New Media at the Service of the Word*<sup>18</sup>, it's not just a matter of how priests and the pastoral ministries should use media, but how they should be trained to take up the call to do more digital media literacy in their work. Pope Benedict was speaking directly in this document about people embracing technology but with fluency and ability to interpret the implications of their usage.

In 2013, during the World Communications Day in his speech *Social Networks: Portals of Truth and Faith; New Spaces for Evangelization*<sup>19</sup>, Benedict states: «Social networks are the result of human interaction, but also reshape the dynamics of communication which builds relationships. A considered understanding of this environment is, therefore, a prerequisite for a significance presence there». The launch of Vatican Twitter account @Pontifex, the official Twitter Papal's profile, falls within this vision, which conceives the virtual

<sup>17</sup> See *New Technologies, New Relationships. Promoting a Culture of Respect, Dialogue and Friendship*, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_mes\\_20090124\\_43rd-world-communications-day.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20090124_43rd-world-communications-day.html).

<sup>18</sup> See WCD (2010) *The Priest and Pastoral Ministry in a Digital World: New Media at the Service of the Word*: [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_mes\\_20100124\\_44th-world-communications-day.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20100124_44th-world-communications-day.html).

<sup>19</sup> See WCD (2013), *Social Networks: portals of truth and faith; new spaces for evangelization* [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_mes\\_20130124\\_47th-world-communications-day.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20130124_47th-world-communications-day.html).

environment not only as a parallel, virtual world, but also as a part of the daily human experience (Narbona 2016).

In conclusion, we see that Benedict is not at all negative about technology, but he encourages a deep theological and rhetorical reflection in those digital practices.

### Francis: The Selfie Pope

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Finally we arrive at the core discussion of this paper: the digital communication of Pope Francis. First of all one of the things we have to understand – especially in the transition between Benedict and Pope Francis – is that Pope Benedict emerges in a very different era. In 2005, during the enthronement of Pope Benedict if you would have been in St. Peter Square you would have seen one or two phones, while in 2013 the whole crowd was waiting the first greeting of Pope Francis with their digital devices (see Fig. 6). Between 2005 and 2008, smartphone have been a real revolution and Benedict has exactly gone through the years of this changing.



Fig. 6

With the smartphone culture, also the Internet started becoming more mobile and embedded into everyday culture. The smartphone really changed people's interactions and what it really meant to be *networked* and interconnected (Bennato 2011).

This new culture not only affects how popes communicate, but also the communication style that differs between Benedict and Francis (Spadaro 2017). Observing the very first tweet that Benedict sent: «Dear friends, I am pleased to get in touch with you though Twitter. Thank you for your generous response. I bless all of you from my heart», is definitely formal in its expression with a sort of broadcasting style messages of him connecting with the people. Moreover, considering that Benedict was very new to Twitter and he was just learning how to use it, the Pope Francis' first tweet can easily seem more personable, friendly, and informal: «Dear friends, I thank you from my heart and I ask you to continue to pray for me. Pope Francis» (Fig. 7). This communication clearly highlights the transition from web 1.0 to web 2.0 culture, from broadcast mentality to a much more interactive and pervasive way of communicating through technology.



Fig. 7

Social media and selfies are often all about facilitating individual's identity performance, and this is also why Pope Francis is often called the «Selfie Pope»<sup>20</sup>. For instance, although Fig. 8 may not have been the first papal selfie, it was absolutely the first official papal

<sup>20</sup> Especially on Us news report. See: *Pope Francis and the First «Papal selfie»*: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/the-pope/10277934/Pope-Francis-and-the-first-Papal-selfie.html>.



selfie that got a lot of international media attention when it hit the press<sup>21</sup>. In this image is evident how the Pope puts himself in a place to be approachable and accessible. He himself is not «selfie-ing» but he is very much willing to jump into this new digital culture and let the people include him.



Fig. 8

While Pope Francis has been accredited as an innovator (Ballardini 2014), in 2016 the Vatican and the Pontifical Council for Social Communication was able to secure the *.catholic* domain<sup>22</sup>. The domain is designed to be a way for the Catholic church and for the Vatican to designate official web sources with a stamp of approval. It will not be given to individual Catholics – so it can't be seen as the church endorsing some people and not others – but rather it will be given to official and institutionalized websites.

Pope Francis has also been known as reforming many areas of the Curia and one of those is looking at the media and communication practices. In 2015, Pope Francis promulgated a *Motu Proprio* instituting the Secretariat for Communication<sup>23</sup>. The *Motu Proprio* establishes

<sup>21</sup> See also *A Brief List of Pope Selfies, Ranked* [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/09/12/a-brief-list-of-pope-selfies-ranked/?utm\\_term=.bbe60cddfdec](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/09/12/a-brief-list-of-pope-selfies-ranked/?utm_term=.bbe60cddfdec).

<sup>22</sup> See *Vaticano, un nuovo dominio Internet per certificare i siti cattolici*: [https://www.repubblica.it/tecnologia/2016/04/05/news/vaticano\\_dominio\\_catholic-136965364/](https://www.repubblica.it/tecnologia/2016/04/05/news/vaticano_dominio_catholic-136965364/).

<sup>23</sup> See *For the Establishment of the Secretariat for Communication* [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu\\_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio\\_20150627\\_segreteria-comunicazione.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio_20150627_segreteria-comunicazione.html).



that all communication offices will be incorporated under the direction of the new Secretariat for Communication, including the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, the Holy See Press Office, Vatican Internet Service, Vatican Radio, the Vatican Television Center (CTV), the Osservatore Romano, Vatican Typography, Photograph Service, and the Vatican Publishing House (Libreria Editrice Vaticana). The new Secretariat will also work in union with the Secretariat of State for the direction of the institutional website of the Holy See, [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va) and the Twitter account of the Holy Father: @pontifex<sup>24</sup>.

In 2018, after the resignation of the Prefect of the Secretariat, Msgr. Dario Edoardo Viganò, the Secretariat was renamed Dicastery for Communication and Pope Francis appointed for the first time a layman as Prefect, the journalist Paolo Ruffini<sup>25</sup>.

Practically instead of having Vatican radio, Vatican television, Vatican publications, the Dicastery's purpose is conglomerating them into one overseeing office with the goal to centralize all news media sources. Similar to what the Pontifical Council had done launching News.va site in 2014, the aim of joining all Vatican's digital platform is to get rid of the layers of bureaucracy and be more integrative in the digital strategies (Valladares, Herrera 2015).

Behind the image of a Pope very friendly and open in the use of digital communication, there is actually a strong institutionalization and structuralizing communication's strategy.

As Pope Francis himself admits<sup>26</sup>: he doesn't use a pc, he doesn't email, etc. So even though he is a supporter of technology, he himself is a latent adopter.

This controversial approach to digital technology of Pope Francis emerges also from his recent Encyclical letter *Laudato Si'* (2015), talking about the virtual environment: «When media and the digital world become omnipresent, their influence can stop people from

<sup>24</sup> See: *Pope Francis Promulgates Motu Proprio Instituting the «Secretariat for Communications»*: [http://www.archivioradiovaticana.va/storico/2015/06/27/pope\\_francis\\_promulgates\\_motu\\_proprio\\_instituting\\_the\\_%E2%80%98secretariat\\_for/en-1154455](http://www.archivioradiovaticana.va/storico/2015/06/27/pope_francis_promulgates_motu_proprio_instituting_the_%E2%80%98secretariat_for/en-1154455).

<sup>25</sup> See Dicastery for Communication: [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/segreteria/segreteria-comunicazione/documents/segreteria-per-comunicazione\\_profilo\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/segreteria/segreteria-comunicazione/documents/segreteria-per-comunicazione_profilo_en.html).

<sup>26</sup> Watch the interview *Yo soy un tronco con la maquina*: <http://www.sanfrancescopatronoditalia.it/notizie/attualita/video-il-papa-si-confessa-in-rete-sono-un-disastro-col-computer-33144#.XSxWRegzblU>.

learning how to live wisely, to think deeply, and to live generously»<sup>27</sup>. Also in 2018, during his speech at the World Meeting Family in Ireland, the Pope warned of the dangers of social media and alerted the delegates to its potential to threaten «the real web of flesh and blood relationships». He said while technology could bring people together if used with «moderation and prudence», it could also be guilty of «imprisoning us in a virtual reality and isolating us from the very relationships that challenge us to grow to our full potential in communion with others»<sup>28</sup>.

So while certainly part of digital culture are embraced by Pope Francis, he is also highly critical of the digital culture, and while we are seeing an over-mediatized and over-socialized Pope, actually in somewhat he is institutionally challenging the digital communication.

## Reflections on Digital Papacies

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Finally, summing up the approach of the past three popes to the Internet we have with Pope John Paul the «Apostolic/Global Pope» of the Internet, with Benedict the «Theologian/Tweeting Pope» of the Internet and currently we have the «Shepherding/Selfie Pope» of the Internet.

But can we actually call Pope Francis the Digital Pope? His communication style has been described as evocative, as succinct, as focused, and very much as speaking to the people (see Fig. 9). His tweeting style is described by meme culture, using who plays of God in a movie... Morgan Freeman plays the role of God, saying: «Most of the people Francis quotes on the Internet are just like most of my quotes on the Internet» (see Fig. 10). This says a lot about the ability of Pope Francis to speak the words of the Gospel in a very practical way that touches people's hearts.

In this brief overview we see three very different communication styles at work. We also argue that had it not been for the embrace of the Internet under the papal office of John Paul, and for the advocacy of Pope Benedict in using social media for religious education

<sup>27</sup> See encyclical letter *Laudato Si'*: [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html).

<sup>28</sup> See the news <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/pope-francis-warns-80-000-at-croke-park-of-social-media-dangers-1.3608016>.

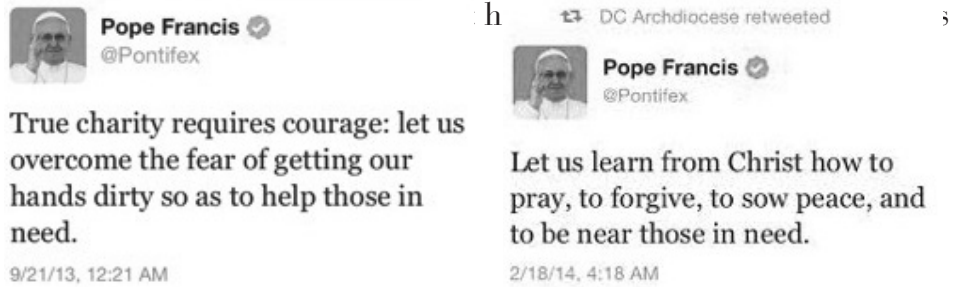


Fig. 9

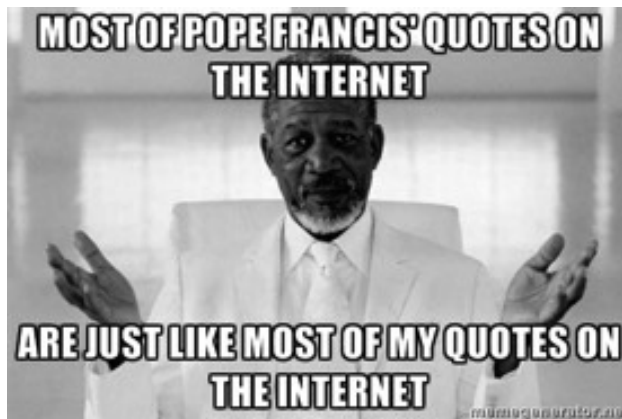


Fig. 10

Yet it was the viral spread of memes that help-invigorate and maybe even helped to rehabilitate the image of the Pope in popular culture, with celebratory memes that appeared during the first few years of Francis's papacy, framing his as a progressive (SM Reputation Metrics 2013).

Social media shaped the iconic image of Pope Francis as media engaged even if he has been relatively less engaged and more critical of digital technologies than previous papal offices (Narbona 2016).

In conclusion, we would describe Pope Francis not truly being a digital Pope in his personal practice, nor even in his language up to this point that he has produced, but rather for his succinct and evocative communication style that is ideal and typical of digital culture. Thus allowing his ideas or persona to go viral online whether it

be through his tweets, the memes that are produced about him, or how he is able to become the ideal form or icon that is easily translatable in the digital era (Vitullo 2014).

Indeed what we have now is a digital papacy, that begins in 1948, from the foundation set of the Pontifical Council on Social Communications. This work, and especially the work of *Communio et Progressio*, has built upon a tradition and trajectory of a very clear and consistent theology of communication relating to new media (Sozzi 2009). The idea that technologies are a gift from God, that Christ is the perfect communicator, have promoted the principle that our media and communication should push for equality and the dignity of all humanity (Shield 2008). Moreover the ideas emerging from World Communications Day, the work of the previous popes and their papacies – embracing computer media culture by calling for reflection and even critique of it – have all risen to what we have now in the Pope of the digital era.

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