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ETHICAL PERSPECTIVES ON MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

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Abstract: Starting from the premise that nowadays media has a privileged status in the way we relate to the other, the paper explores the ethical challenges raised by the growing mediated nature of communication. Since the mediated communication calls for a multidisciplinary examination, the article uses conceptual tools offered by a different framework. First, we draw on M. Buber's ontology of relation in order to discuss mediation in terms of authenticity. Then, we analyze different views on the special dynamics of the relation between ethics, religion and mediated communication. In the last part of the article, we emphasize the idea that, in order to acknowledge the true significance of the recent changes that affect the way we communicate, they should be read in terms of a postmodern ethics.

Key Words: mediated communication, ethics, religious experience, mediation, new media, postmodern ethics, difference, Martin Buber.

The recent developments in the field of communication technology have a strong impact on contemporary society.¹ Caught in the communicational vortex, we find ourselves out of balance in the face of gadgets which deprive us of the necessary time to reflect upon our current status. Furthermore, given the “dynamic and ever-changing world of media technology which makes any permanent resolution impossible”,² any attempt to outline a relatively stable framework, within which the individual of a communicational society can fit, quickly becomes anachronistic and constantly demands reconsideration. In this context, it is only obvious that the ethical reflection becomes an essential endeavor.

Communication ethics is an extremely wide research area located at the intersection of different disciplines, the variety of topics that fall under the umbrella of communication ethics research being very broad and including issues ranging from the problem of truth and deception, to social justice and human dignity. Today, more than ever, we live in a society constructed at a symbolic level with instruments of media communication. These meanings, built from the vast social repertoire of words and images in which we live, words and images delivered mostly through media and constituting what we experience as reality are “inherently ethical because they imply the choosing of the way in which we define ourselves and our world.”³

In the process of this cultural transformation, technology mediated communication occupies a very important place. We are in the middle of a new media revolution - the shift of all of our culture to computer-mediated forms of production, distribution and communication. Lev Manovich considers that this new revolution is unarguably more profound than the previous ones, such as printing or photography, and that we are just beginning to sense its effects. Digital media revolution affects all stages of communication, including acquisition, manipulating, storage and distribution; it also affects all types of media - text, still images, moving images, sound, and spatial constructions.⁴ The new media and the digital revolution represent the core of a global cultural transformation that has a major impact on the manner in which we manipulate, represent and communicate with the world.⁵

Furthermore, the digital culture becomes the new paradigm of today's reality due to the fact that it is an actual presence in everyone's life which, supposedly, changes the manner in which reality as such is conceived. As Maria Bakardjieva asserts, the Internet is embedded in our everyday life, not somehow fundamentally separated from it. The Internet is no longer a “technological unicum”, that requires new methodologies for its study, but it can be approached through a wide range of familiar and established methodologies and disciplines. The impact of new media on the major spheres of our life - personal, professional and social- has manifold facets and demands the approach of the phenomenon from a multidisciplinary perspective. Moreover, the

dynamism of the new media renders the identification of a methodology and of a definitive theoretical approach an impossible task. The new media are open rather to a “cut and paste” of different methods and theories approach.⁶ Thus, the multi-and trans-disciplinary approach is the only viable methodological option.

Once Web 2.0 appeared and the social element was introduced in the media sphere, allowing the user to create and distribute the content, communication became the main element used in order to define the Internet. Even our dialogue with the world is strongly influenced by the digital paradigm, and often when we ask questions and we give answers we behave like Internet users and content creators. In this respect, Boris Groys emphasizes that Google, for example, “takes over positions occupied traditionally by philosophy and religion, thus becoming first known philosophical machine that regulates our dialogue with the world by substituting “vague” metaphysical and ideological presuppositions with strictly formalized and universally applicable rules of access”.⁷ Even if sometimes one can note that they work according to principles similar to those magic-religious ones promoted by various religious organizations, we associate them with different premises, at least in order to protect ourselves from too big a presence of the religious in the public space and especially in the new public space that is built as the real of a virtual world.⁸ Yet, when we want to talk about the symbolic construction of the public space, even when resorting to a philosophical interpretation, “we would rather rely on the mythological premise of a collective memory conceived as a cultural memory of a community, or furthermore even of human being understood as imagined being always experiencing relations that involve constructing an imagined community. In this respect, it is essential to accept a cultural construct that should talk to us about the human intrinsic capacity to perceive the presence of the sacred and to build ways to meet with the sacred in a median space of religious experience. This religious experience is one that is lived by contemporary man as a symbolic experience in which the daily and the familiar are elements that matter more than the irruption of the supernatural. What is part of the manifestation of a language pertaining to the transcendent is assimilated at the level of the immanence of life”.⁹

As a result, more important than the answer to the question “What is New Media?” is the answer to questions such as “What is new for society with New Media?”¹⁰ and “Which are the best conceptual ethical instruments helping us understand the challenges facing us?”. In this context, our approach proposes a reflection from an ethical perspective on the growing mediated nature of communication in contemporary society.

Mediating Communication

The traditional clear distinction between the two major forms of communication: direct or face-to-face communication, involving the presence of the interlocutors in the same physical space, and mediated communication, with interlocutors not in the same place and using technology - telephone, internet, television, or even organizations - in order to communicate,¹¹ is diluted by the new developments within the sphere of communication technology. Nowadays, when we discuss more and more about the “mediation of everything”¹², about the “mediated globalization”¹³, the privileged status of media becomes even more prominent in the way we relate to the world and to the other. The ways in which communication takes place may be decisive for the global balance, because “any group which wishes to gain the power, whether it is a political, economic, technological, cultural, or religious group, has a normal reaction from the social and political perspective. The way this group communicates with the masses is decisive, because a communicational war is more desirable than a tangible aggressive one”.¹⁴

A challenge related to this distinction is addressed by Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue, that conceives the issue of mediation in terms of authenticity.¹⁵ For Buber, the existence of technology in the process of communication is not especially relevant for the distinction between the mediated and the immediate. Instead, the distinction provides the terms for describing a relation either as an I-Thou relation or as an I-It relation.

The essential characteristic of an authentic relationship is, for Buber, the absolute immediacy. The I-Thou relation is immediate; it is not mediated by any category of thought. The Thou is not even situated in time and space. When I do this, when I place Thou in a particular point, in a particular moment in time, or in a particular place in space, my personal “Thou” becomes an “It”. The true present, not just a point on the time axis, limited by past and future, but the absolute Presence exists only within genuine relation and engagement.¹⁶

But it is precisely the immediate character of the genuine relation that represents a problematic aspect in Martin Buber's thought, similarly, according to Nathan Rotenstreich, to any philosophical approach which does not only start from immediate data, but tries to remain in that sphere, denying the need for explanation and for what this process implies: an observer, an inherent conceptual frame which surpasses the relation between an I and a Thou. “I – Thou is a structure and cannot be identified as an immediate experience from here and of now.”¹⁷ Rotenstreich considers that the mediation cannot be avoided by Buber, because the two fundamental attitudes belong to a specific context, of I – Thou, I – It, which is not an external circumstance, but the delimitation of a state by the other state, their comparison and juxtaposition. Furthermore, he says

that stating what is immediate implies more than a role of witness; it also implies a role of spectator, because the simple rendering of a condition already implies its interpretation.

The immediate nature of an authentic relation is analyzed from a critical perspective by Rotenstreich, starting from equating awareness, as Buber describes it when he talks about the emergence of the “I” from the “I – Thou” relation, with reflection. Rotenstreich considers that Buber oscillates between the factual portrayal of human life and its ontology. In Buber’s perspective the acknowledgement of the “I – Thou” relation is very intense, elementary, direct and it does not objectify itself. But, Rotenstreich warns us that the intense attribute does not involve the direct or the fundamental one. The fact that we are not reflecting on the authentic relation means that we decided not to. “It is a reflection which cancels itself by deciding not to reflect.”¹⁸ Rotenstreich emphasizes the necessity of distinguishing between active awareness as such and particular attention directed to a particular situation. The dichotomy between general concepts and individual experiences which transpires from Buber’s point of view cannot be maintained, because any act of identification implies a concept, in the end. Reflection, awareness, and knowledge cannot be avoided, concludes Rotenstreich. In search of immediacy, Buber presented it as being closed and did not offer an alternative where I and Thou can be positioned objectively. An objective perspective is legitimized not only through guidance and understanding, and Rotenstreich considers that these aspects are entirely ignored by Buber.¹⁹

In response to these criticisms, Buber argues that the comparison of reflection with awareness is the result of a major misunderstanding. He considers that the difference between “the first lightning flash” of self-consciousness and the “elaborate” second one has, in fact, a fundamental significance because “the I that emerges is aware of itself, but without reflecting on itself so as to become an object.”²⁰ Accordingly, for Buber, mediation in communication does not allow to say to the other the basic word, I – Thou and condemns him to the status of It. As already mentioned, even if this distinction is not so important in the sphere of morality, it marks the authenticity of the relation, while Rotenstreich’s approach is relevant for drawing attention to the limits of the relation’s immediacy as Buber describes it.

Beyond these remarks coming from Martin Buber’s ontology of dialogue, we have to accept that the essential relation between communication and ethics becomes even more complex when the notion of mediation is introduced in the discussion, and the views of the authors discussing the matter become more passionate and vary between two extremes.

On the one hand, there are the optimists who regard the technological developments in the field of communication as an almost redemptive element; on the other hand, there are the authors who seek to

unmask the devastating impact of technological mediation on the lives of individuals.

Ethics and the mediation of difference

The issue of mediation in communication represents a constant source of investigation in different fields of research. The need for examination from an ethical perspective becomes evident, given that the development of communication technologies generates both the persistent questioning of old ethical issues, and the facing of new challenges.

Even if we embrace the premise of ethical neutrality in the field of technology, these issues still remain pressing and are often described in terms of “losses” generated by the technological reconfiguration of communication. Fernando Leal, for instance, identifies five categories of issues, or “losses” which represent the result of the technological reconfiguration of communication. These categories compose a design in which elements are strongly connected. In the center of this design there is the loss of identity and, around it there are the loss of skills, the loss of control, the loss of privacy and the loss of communication.²¹

On the other hand, technology mediated communication can be viewed as a form of free communication which provides new ways of connecting with others and of experiencing the self as something fluid and decentralized. These virtual spaces generate an online common place, thus establishing real social organizations and even a new form of socialization.

For example, computer mediated communication (CMC) is considered either a superficial and impersonal phenomenon which degrades the capacity of an authentic relation, or a phenomenon which facilitates communication and offers participants the chance to develop personal, emotional and dialogical relations. Gordon Graham distinguishes between the Cartesian idea that people are fundamentally represented by their minds, which supports the belief that CMC disciplines bodiless intelligences that are more free and less burdened, and purer in a way, thus closer to a “real” person, and the reverse of this Cartesianism, according to which the mind is deprived and electronic communication defined as linguistic exchanges between bodiless intelligences is a limited form of communication between people.²²

An important source of ethical difficulties for genuine communication in this medium is, according to Amit Pinchevski, its potential to control the on-line interaction. The main critical perspectives on CMC regard the deficit of presence in the on-line interaction and its controllable medium, easily influenced by the user, where this interaction takes place. This control manifests itself in three ways: the ability to control the presence of the self and of the other; the ability to manage exposure and

vulnerability, and thus to eliminate surprise; the ways in which a textual communication generates the feeling of a separate space and of a common time.²³

The awareness of the mechanisms and limits of technology mediated communication represents, for Pinchevski, an essential factor that could facilitate an ethical relation with the other.

A similar solution is envisaged by Michel Bugeja who analyzes the moral implications of communicational technology development from a rather pessimistic point of view. The author uses Marshall McLuhan's famous quote "the medium is the message" in order to establish that nowadays "the medium is the moral".

Although he uses as starting point McLuhan's view according to which "the personal and social consequences of any medium – in any of our extensions – results from the new dimension introduced in our activities through every one of our extension, or through every new technology"²⁴, Bugeja's argumentation focuses on a different perspective. He sponsors a critique of technology in general and of communicational technology in particular using the analysis performed by the French philosopher Jaques Ellul, which describes the nature of technology as incapable of "moral judgment" and unwilling to "accept morality in the work of the technician."²⁵ Technology is an organism, a purpose in itself which changes anything it comes into contact with, without changing itself. Ellul talks about the viral essence of technology which, once it is introduced in any system, no matter how independent that system is, reconfigures its principles in order to bind it to its own protocol. Thus, technology does not free us, but rather forces us to conform to its criteria.²⁶

Bugeja considers that, when McLuhan speaks of a "global village", he does not foresee cyberspace. The bi-logistic view embraced by McLuhan in his interpretation of the relation with technology does not explain the way in which it influences us, because in Bugeja's view, he perceives humans as information systems, not as humans existing in an informational space. To illustrate his view, Bugeja gives as example the well-known story of the tree that falls in a forest. If no one hears it fall, does the sound exist? No. But what if we place a microphone in that place? From a biological perspective, this becomes an extension of an ear. But Bugeja sees this presumption to imply two sets of senses: one where the person is situated, this being the real place, and the other where the microphone is, this being the virtual place. So, from Bugeja's point of view, technology generates a "breach in the senses" and a "breach of consciousness", responsible for what the author calls "interpersonal divide": "the void generated by technology when it seduces people into believing that someone or something from a different place is more important than someone or something next to them."²⁷ For examples to this argument, he mentions the lack of focus while driving, the carelessness at the work place or at home caused by the screen addiction.

Like Pinchevski, Bugeja views the solution to lie in accepting the doubtful nature of technology and of the way in which it undermines the foundations that until recently seemed unquestionable. Moreover, we should protect the diminished sense of a community connected with nature, time, and culture.²⁸

Oddly enough, it is precisely the fact that communication technology development shakes the framework of our understanding communication which represents the source of the optimistic arguing the impact of the growing presence of mediated communication in our life.

In this respect, an important phenomenon which cannot be overlooked, and which characterizes the communicational society is the blurred boundary between interpersonal communication and mass communication. These shifting borders strongly influence the way in which we communicate, and this change in paradigm must also reflect itself in the way communication in contemporary society is perceived at a theoretical level.

Starting from the premise that “technology is an enabler, not the point of social interaction with others”,²⁹ Melanie Polkosky analyzes the challenges posed by technology development to interpersonal communication, emphasizing that the study of interpersonal communication should take into account the new developments introduced by communicational technology, such as new partners, new types of interaction, new skills needed in communication such as linguistic, operational and social skills which would help the interlocutors adapt to the new communicational conditions.

The author looks at three types of communication mediated through technology which have recently undergone a consistent development and which question the classical thinking patterns of the relation between interpersonal communication and technology mediated communication: computer mediated communication (CMC), augmentative and alternative communication (AAC), and speech user interface (SUI). The importance of technology in these types of communication questions some of the fundamental assumptions of the theoretical model built around interpersonal communication. First of all, the idea that both parts are human, the author asserting the irrelevance of knowing whether an interlocutor is human or not, demonstrates the communication behavior which “holds trait-implying properties.”³⁰ Also, the difference between interpersonal communication and other types of communication which define themselves in relation to it, like mass, impersonal or even intrapersonal communication, is obscured by the technological development. Another aspect questioned by new communication technologies is that according to which the main purpose of communication is the construction and preservation of relations. Polkosky highlights the importance of other purposes such as information transfer, the conveyance of needs, desires, social proximity, social etiquette, the preservation of power and self-esteem.³¹

On the optimistic assumption that communicational technology has the ability to convey a new way of connecting people, Melanie Polkosky thinks that the broadening of communicational frontiers, representing new forms of social interaction generated by the technological developments, requires new theoretical frameworks and undermines the privileged place occupied by interpersonal communication as model for other types of communication.

As we already saw, some of the issues confronting us from the sphere of communication in contemporary society are old and inherent to the development of technology, while some are genuinely new and demand novel theoretical instruments in order for us to be able to approach them in a balanced manner.

The framework of our approaching religion in the media-based society is provided by the widespread remark: "the Internet is both a mirror and a shadow of the offline world"³². This sentence emphasizes that there is almost nothing left in the real world which is not already available online, and there is nothing left in the online realm which does not already have a basis offline. We depart from the assumption that the dynamics of the relation between the religious realm and the online one is telling for illustrating the major changes taking place in the context of recent developments in communication technologies.

It is a commonplace that understanding the Internet as a mere vehicle of transmitting information is outdated, the online realm being in the first place an environment for relation and identity building. Moreover, the virtual realm is a fruitful environment for the display of various forms of spirituality, especially in the context in which "religion today is much more a public, commodified, therapeutic, and personalized set of practices than it has been in the past."³³

Recent developments in communicational technologies are matching religion amazingly, both in its traditional forms, and in the more exotic ones. John D. Caputo explains this in his own particular manner, by showing the "common denominator," explaining the affinity between religion and the new communication technologies development: our exposure to hyper-reality. Both religion and the online realm "disturbs our sense of reality and leaves us a little unhinged". The development of the communicational technologies marks for Caputo the moment when "We have begun, God help us, to tamper with our sense of what is real. But is that not what every religious figure from the Jewish prophet to the televangelist has dreamed of doing?"³⁴

This availability of virtual reality to answer the spiritual need in the context of a decreased importance of religious institutions has been signaled by Stephen D. O'Leary, who predicted the capability of religious movements to adapt to the new communication technologies and the importance networks would play in the cultural marketplace. Ever since 1992, in his article *Cyberspace as Sacred Space*, O'Leary analyzed the rituals

and the religious neo-pagan terminology from the virtual space, underlying the importance of the attempts “to recreate or simulate real space in virtual space and to sanctify a portion of this space as a theater in which spirit is manifested; an establishing of difference with the world outside as well as with other territories of cyberspace; and an assertion of the power of language to bring about wish fulfillment through the verbal act of declaring the wish within the ritual circle. To this extent, they appear as attempts to fulfill authentic spiritual needs now unmet by the major institutions of religious tradition.”³⁵

In this context, it is important to maintain the distinction Helland proposed between *religion online* – referring to “the provision of information about and/or services related to various religious groups and traditions” and *online religion* which “invites internet visitors to participate in religious practices”.³⁶ The two phenomena are seen as being one in the continuity of the other and as evolving together, rather than being dichotomous³⁷. Of course, there is the problem of the way we define “practicing the online religion”, due precisely to the subjective nature of religious experience and to the difficulty of evaluating the degree of authenticity of the online act. Departing from the classic definition of religion, formulated by Clifford Geertz,³⁸ Helland believes that online religion may fulfill the conditions formulated by Geertz, as long as, although lived by and through the Internet, for individuals participating at religious activities there is no “separation between their offline life and experiences and their online life and experiences, and their religious activities and worldview permeate both environments.”³⁹

The analysis proposed by Heidi A. Campbell emphasizes several characteristics of the online religious practice, which are making it an “important microcosm for studying trends within religious practice and meaning-making in society”. Thus, when we refer either to the online realm or the offline one, the religious phenomenon manifests itself as a “networked religion”, specific to a network-based society where relations become less centralized and the technological mediation becomes more and more present.⁴⁰

The online religious practices show several distinctive features mutually interconnected which provide a useful interpretative scheme for analyzing both the religious phenomenon, and the communication in the larger context of a society that is increasingly technology-mediated.

A characteristic identified by Campbell is the presence of network communities, namely “the loose social networks with varying levels of religious affiliation and commitment”, which expand and supplement the religious participation in the offline realm.⁴¹

Another feature of the online religion is the occurrence of “storied identities”. Gofmann’s performed self uses the internet as a rich reservoir of resources in the process of construction of identity, offering the possibility to evade the traditional structures of identity formation and

“new methods and possibilities for constructing religious identities, especially for people who lack such opportunities in the local or offline context”.⁴² Bloggers and religious bloggers in particular are a good example to illustrate this feature. “Religious blogging is both community-oriented and individualized simultaneously”, from the moment when, in their activity, the bloggers admit their affiliation to a network or a group, although the blog is rather a personal diary in which they present a personal view on spirituality.⁴³

The direct consequence of these features is the undermining of the traditional forms of authority and hierarchies and the emergence of new types of authority, such as web masters, moderators or bloggers. But, as Campbell emphasizes, these shifts in power only reflect the “the current social dynamics and tensions religious authorities are faced with offline”.⁴⁴ Moreover, the online permits the users to select from a large variety of religious and spiritual options in order to construct a personalized religious belief and encourages a convergent form of religious practice, the internet becoming thus a religious marketplace.

This convergence and the tools offered by the Internet – such as hypertexts, hyperlinks, *like and share* in social media, etc. – fundamentally stamp the experience and the online religious behavior with all that it involves – prayers, ritual, pilgrimage, communion. Thus, a “bricolage-religion” is developed,⁴⁵ making a rule from the general tendency, also inherent to traditional forms of religiosity, to mix up the institutionalized religious forms with personal or local aspects.

Thus, a “multisite reality” is created, which connects practices that take place in different contexts. The main characteristic of this reality is the fact that “the online world is consciously and unconsciously imprinted by its users with the values, structures, and expectations of the offline world,”⁴⁶ the boundaries between offline and online becoming more and more blurred. The overlap of online and offline in creating the reality, saturates the internet with symbolical power and makes it the major source for the spiritual seekers in today’s society.

However, in order to avoid extreme tonalities, either dystopic or utopic, in analyzing the impact of the development of new media on both the religious phenomenon and the social practices, it is important to underline that “people are doing online pretty much what they do offline, but they are doing it differently”⁴⁷ and that “the internet serves as a mirror to highlight social shifts occurring in the public understanding of social practice at many different levels, the performance of religion being just one of these.”⁴⁸

The transition to the online realm, or rather the interplay with the offline realm, is mainly displayed through a crisis of traditional authority and of “authenticity”⁴⁹. Even better, we could talk about reconceptualizing them in terms specific to the network. This represents a major change in

the manner we conceive of and relate to the traditional structures of identity building.

Starting from the premise of “the everydayness of an Internet that is embedded in our lives”⁵⁰, we must accept the fact that the boundary between on line and off line dilutes. Consequently, the sense of identity is growingly “distributed across the computer networks,” in larger communities and requires a “distributed morality”, which is only at its beginning.⁵¹ Furthermore, the two main characteristics of new media, namely, the convergence which put several technologies in one single gadget giving us increased power and the expansion of Internet and the global access which make us more cosmopolite,⁵² outline a picture which demands the ethical scrutinizing.

In this framework, Charles Ess considers that the new media suits an ethical pluralism that preserves the fundamental differences defining particular conception featuring specific cultures while, at the same time, making possible a frame of reference that will assure the common ground for the particular voices connected by the network.

The analysis of specific ethical issues, such as privacy on the internet, pornography or computer games, gives Ess the necessary premises to affirm that virtue ethics promises to function as a plural and global ethics that combine the shared norms and values with the diversity of interpretations which mirrors and support distinct cultural traditions. Because it focuses on the habits and abilities an individual must acquire and practice in order to become a good human being, which is to fulfill his potential to act rationally and compassionately, and to fulfill his obligations towards the others, the ethical theory of virtue pictures the recent developments in digital media.⁵³ We cannot overlook here that “any citizen bears the moral obligation of getting involved actively in the life of society generally ... this individual responsibility is fundamental for the group and organization responsibilities, being grounded on humanistic, political and religious philosophic principles”.⁵⁴

The ethics described by Ess is built around what he calls an “epistemological humility” that “recognizes that our ways of knowing and doing are *not* universal, but are rather limited precisely to those of our own *ethnos*, our own people and traditions. If we wish to communicate with the Other as Other (i.e., as irreducibly different from ourselves) our next task is then to learn what we can of the Other’s language, customs, and practices and appropriate these into our own “vocabulary” of communicative skills and abilities.”⁵⁵

This epistemological humility could reduce the risk of ethnocentrism and cultural imperialism which, nevertheless, cannot be totally avoided because communication technology encloses the cultural values and communicational preferences of the primary users. Ess draws the attention to the importance of being aware of the significance of cultural values and of the way in which they can be cultivated by a certain communi-

cation medium and conflict with other values, in order to reduce that risk. In this context, he underlines the idea of a resurrection of virtue ethics which concentrate on the relation between self and community and allow plural interpretations that “will mirror the irreducible differences characterizing the specific cultural identities and traditions.”⁵⁶

At this point, we have to note that the concepts Ess uses in the description of the plural and global ethics are very similar to those describing the conception of the theoreticians of postmodern ethics. The names that we can mention in this respect are Gianni Vattimo and John D. Caputo. Both of them emphasize “the emancipative importance” of the outbreak of a multitude of particular rationalities and the acknowledgment of historicity and contingency of all value systems that emerges within the world of mass media.⁵⁷ “The modern mega-polis” becomes the favorable ground for the development of a new “meta-phronesis, namely, the skill to cope with competing paradigms”, the virtue of knowing how to enjoy it and to live with the dissemination of ethos.⁵⁸

Thus, understanding the cardinal importance of difference and Alterity in reconfiguring the ethical framework in the context of increasing mediated nature of communication, becomes indispensable for a balanced and complex approach of the ethical challenges posed to us by the communicational society.

In the context of the globalization of communication, the central point in ethical debate becomes both the necessity and the possibility of the mediation of difference. The concept of difference represents equally the main source and the stake of the ethical research in the field of communication studies. The difference represents, as Ronald C. Arnett affirms, the new dwelling place for goodness,⁵⁹ the postmodern house of goodness which directs the study of communication ethics. Moreover, Arnett demonstrates that the key role played by the concept of difference in the communicational society brings us back to wonder about “the refractory point of view which keeps the notion of meta-narrative alive in a postmodern world.”⁶⁰

Conclusions

The powerful impact of communication technologies development on the way in which we experience communication on a daily basis represents a challenge and needs a rethinking of theoretical frameworks needed in a balanced and complex approach of the communication process in postmodern society.

A particular example of the way in which the relation between ethics, religion and communication functions in media-based society is advertising. In the symbolic conscience of the postmodern human, “advertising offers an alternative view on the world, on the human being and on the way in which the individual chooses to act, influenced by this

alternative view. Everything that constitutes the postmodern human condition is engrained with communication ... advertising is understood as a medium capable of storing the postmodern promises of sacredness”.⁶¹

Contemporary society is strongly influenced by the phenomenon of mediated communication, in a context where “most social life is already routinely electronically mediated, or rather where social life has already turned into an electronic life or cyber life and where most social life is conducted primary in the company of a computer, iPods or mobile, and only secondary with other fleshy beings.”⁶² The issue of mediation is analyzed according to Martin Buber’s relation ontology, and this discussion’s framework is about communication “authenticity”. Beyond the difficulties of such an approach, as they were highlighted by Nathan Rotenstreich’s analysis, what still remains is the issue of referencing from an ethical perspective on this phenomenon which occupies an important place in the current life of an individual, challenges us to question traditional assessment marks, going as far as to challenge the privileged position of interpersonal communication.

In the context of an unprecedented development of communicational technologies, mediated communication is increasingly becoming a tool “not for self-expression, but for self-destruction”⁶³ by its ubiquitous and subversive presence which always delivers us difference. But this should be understood in terms of postmodern ethics, in order not to fall into the trap of Manichaeism and to acknowledge the true significance of this change.

Notes:

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³ K. Burke, apud Phyllis M. Japp, Mark Meister, Debra K. Japp, *Communication Ethics, Media and Popular Culture. An Introduction* in Phyllis M. Japp, Mark Meister, Debra K. Japp, *Communication Ethics, Media and Popular culture* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2005), 9.

⁴ L. Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002).

⁵ In this respect, the following ethical reflections are useful: Nicolae Al. Pop, Dan-Cristian Dabija, Ana Maria Iorga, “Ethical Responsibility of Neuromarketing Companies in Harnessing the Market Research – a Global Exploratory Approach”, *Amfiteatru Economic*, 16 (35), (2014): 26-40; or Gabriel Cristian Sabou, Puiu Nistoreanu, Denisa Vlad, “The Ethics of Online Touristic Counselling: A Matter of Users Satisfaction”, *Amfiteatru Economic*, 16 (Special Issue 8), (2014): 1279-1287.

⁶ G. Creeber, R. Martin, *Digital Cultures. Understanding New Media* (Glasgow:

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⁷ Boris Groys, Google, *Words beyond Grammar* (100 Notes, 100 Thoughts: Documenta Series 046, 2012),

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⁸ Ioan Hosu, Sandu Frunză, "Religious Affiliation and Social Action in the Public Space", *Revista de cercetare și intervenție socială*, vol. 43 (2013): 244.

⁹ Sandu Frunză, *Advertising constructs reality. Religion and advertising in the consumer society*, (București: Tritonic, 2014), 166.

¹⁰ G. Creeber, R. Martin, *Digital Cultures. Understanding New Media*, 4.

¹¹ C. Beciu, *Comunicare și discurs mediatic* (București: Comunicare.ro, 2009), 11.

¹² S. Livingstone, *On the mediation of everything*: ICA presidential address 2008, *Journal of Communication*, 59 (1), (2009): 1-18.

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