

“AD INTRA” AND “AD EXTRA”: BALANCING INTERNAL AND PUBLIC COMMUNICATION IN A NETWORKED ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

This paper starts from the assumption that the digital, networked environment significantly changes the way institutions with a strong internal structure align internal and public communication. (Habermas, 1989) In the case of the Catholic Church, inward-oriented communication (ad intra) has the task of preserving cohesion, coordination and pastoral purpose, while outward communication (ad extra) operates in the public sphere, where messages are interpreted through media frames, audience expectations and the dynamics of social networks. Under such conditions, the boundary between the internal and the public becomes more porous: information travels faster, messages are more frequently reshaped, and the risk of misunderstandings and reputational consequences increases, especially in crisis situations. The aim of the paper is to analytically describe the key tensions between confidentiality and transparency, hierarchical coordination and the need for rapid response, as well as the relationship between a universal message and local contextualization. The paper proposes a conceptual framework for understanding the balance between ad intra and ad extra communication in a networked environment and highlights typical points of “noise” in the transmission of messages across different levels of institutional structure. The expected contribution is a clearer differentiation of communication functions, the recognition of patterns that produce message inconsistency, and the formulation of recommendations for more consistent, timely and dialogically oriented public communication, while preserving internal cohesion and institutional credibility.

Keywords: *institutional communication; internal communication; public communication; digital media; multi-level communication; trust; reputation*

1. INTRODUCTION

The digital, networked environment has changed the way institutions communicate, and it has had a particularly strong impact on institutions that are hierarchically structured and multi-level. (Castells, 2010; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) In such systems, messages are not created and transmitted “in one stroke”; rather, they pass through multiple levels, enter different interpretative frames and meet diverse audience expectations. The Catholic Church, as a global institution with a clearly organized internal structure and a developed relationship with the public, is an example of a system in which the question of balancing

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internal and public communication is especially sharp. In this paper, inward-oriented communication is referred to as *ad intra* communication: communication that serves cohesion, coordination, formation and the building of a shared understanding within the institution. Outward-oriented communication is referred to as *ad extra* communication: communication intended for the public, the media and external stakeholders, operating within the public sphere. Under traditional conditions, the distinction between these two communication domains was relatively clear: internal documents and instructions circulated within the system, while public communication took place through official statements, press releases and clearly identified channels. In a networked environment, this boundary increasingly proves porous. Internal information can “leak” into the public, public communication can be immediately interpreted and reshaped at local levels, and the speed and dynamics of social networks create pressure for a rapid response even when internal coordination is still ongoing. (Hepp, 2013; Hjarvard, 2008; Cornelissen, 2020)

The aim of the paper is to analytically describe the key tensions between *ad intra* and *ad extra* communication in a networked environment, explain why they arise, and propose a conceptual framework that helps to understand and manage the balance between internal cohesion and public transparency. The paper starts from the question: how can an institution preserve unity and responsibility in the digital age while enabling timely, understandable and dialogically oriented outward communication? Special emphasis is placed on situations of heightened sensitivity, namely crisis situations, in which the communication balance is most often “tested”. (Hepp, 2013; Hjarvard, 2008)

The expected contribution of the paper is threefold. First, it conceptually differentiates the functions of internal and public communication in a multi-level institution. Second, it identifies typical points of “noise” in the transmission of messages across levels and channels in a networked environment. Third, it proposes a set of guidelines that can be applied in practice to reduce message inconsistency, increase clarity and preserve public trust without undermining internal cohesion. (Hepp, 2013; Hjarvard, 2008)

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: INTERNAL AND PUBLIC COMMUNICATION IN A MULTI-LEVEL INSTITUTION

2.1. Functions of *ad intra* communication

Internal communication in an institution such as the Catholic Church has several core functions. The first is coordination: aligning actions and communicative performances across levels, from the center of the system to local communities. The second is cohesion: maintaining a shared identity, value framework and sense of belonging. The third is formation and orientation: internal communication often carries an instructive, interpretative and guiding dimension that helps members of the institution understand the content of messages, their context and desirable ways of acting. The fourth is accountability: in a hierarchically organized system, internal communication also serves as a mechanism for allocating responsibility, that is, determining who, when and to what extent speaks on behalf of the institution. (Welch & Jackson, 2007)

In a networked environment, *ad intra* communication increasingly includes digital channels: internal communication tools, faster forms of coordination, the sharing of materials and guidelines, as well as the need to respond quickly to information that spreads publicly. This gives internal communication a new dimension: it is no longer merely the

“preparation” of public communication, but becomes an ongoing process of managing information that is already circulating. (Hepp, 2013; Hjarvard, 2008; Welch & Jackson, 2007)

2.2. Functions of ad extra communication

Public communication of an institution is oriented toward society and operates in the public sphere. (Habermas, 1989) Its key functions include informing, interpreting, bearing witness to values, building relationships with stakeholders, and preserving credibility and reputation. In the context of the Church, public communication simultaneously carries elements of an institutional performance (organizational dimension) and elements of a message interpreted as value-based and identity-forming (symbolic dimension). For that reason, public communication in a networked environment can be exposed to multiple interpretations: what is institutionally intended as information can be perceived as a political message; what is intended as a pastoral address can be perceived as social commentary; and what is intended as a universal message can be perceived through a local cultural or political context. (Hepp, 2013; Hjarvard, 2008)

The digital environment intensifies these processes because messages are shared, commented on and reshaped beyond the control of the original sender. This does not mean that the institution “loses” the ability to speak publicly, but it does mean that it must take far more seriously the dynamics of secondary interpretation: media frames, audience comments and the speed of information diffusion.

2.3. Balance and tensions: confidentiality, transparency, speed and consistency

The balance between ad intra and ad extra communication is not static. It depends on the topic, context, level of the institutional structure and the sensitivity of the situation. In practice, three groups of tensions most commonly appear.

The first tension is confidentiality versus transparency. Internal communication often presupposes a certain degree of confidentiality (for coordination, accountability or the protection of decision-making processes), whereas public communication in contemporary society expects transparency and timeliness. In a networked environment, pressure for transparency increases, but so does the risk that incomplete or insufficiently verified information will harm the institution. (Hepp, 2013; Hjarvard, 2008; Welch & Jackson, 2007)

The second tension is hierarchical coordination versus speed of response. Multi-level institutions traditionally ensure message consistency through alignment processes. The networked environment, however, rewards speed: if the institution is late, the narrative may be taken over by other actors. This creates a dilemma: how to respond quickly enough without undermining internal coordination and accountability?

The third tension is the universal message versus local contextualization. The Church, as a global institution, sends messages that are universal by nature. Yet their reception and effectiveness depend on the local context. Digital channels allow local levels to communicate and adapt messages more quickly, but this can lead to variations that the public interprets as inconsistency.

These tensions should not be viewed as a “problem to be eliminated”, but as a structural fact of multi-level communication in a networked environment. This is precisely why it is important to develop a framework that enables recognizing and managing the balance, instead of improvising in each situation. (Hepp, 2013; Hjarvard, 2008)

3. NETWORKED ENVIRONMENT AND MEDIATIZATION: WHY THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN AD INTRA AND AD EXTRA ARE CHANGING

In a networked environment, communication acquires several characteristics that directly affect the balance between the internal and the public. (Hepp, 2013; Hjarvard, 2008)

First, communication is fragmented. Audiences are not unified; they consist of groups that receive information through different platforms and interpretative frames. Second, communication is accelerated. The expectation of timeliness often outweighs the expectation of “completeness” of information. Third, communication is interactive. Public communication is no longer one-way dissemination; it enters a dynamic of reactions, comments and secondary diffusion. Fourth, communication is archived. A post remains available, is quoted and used as evidence of consistency or inconsistency. Fifth, communication is emotionally amplified. The networked environment encourages quick reactions, polarization and the simplification of complex issues.

These elements make ad intra and ad extra communication increasingly intertwined. Internal communication can no longer assume the “closedness” of its information, while public communication cannot assume “control” over interpretation. In this sense, balance is achieved not only through rules about what is internal and what is public, but also through clear protocols: who speaks, how messages are prepared, how the local level is aligned with the general framework, and how one reacts when information is already circulating publicly. (Welch & Jackson, 2007)

4. TYPICAL POINTS OF “NOISE” IN MULTI-LEVEL COMMUNICATION

Based on the conceptual discussion, typical points can be identified where “noise” arises in the transmission of messages in a networked environment. They are important because they show where the balance most often breaks down. (Hepp, 2013; Hjarvard, 2008)

The first point is differences in temporal rhythm. The central level often communicates more slowly because it aligns the message and takes care of universality. The local level feels a need for a faster reaction because it responds to concrete questions of the community. In a networked environment, this difference becomes more visible and can be interpreted as a lack of coordination. (Hepp, 2013; Hjarvard, 2008)

The second point is differences in language and tone. The central level often uses a more general, formal style, while the local level uses more direct and contextual speech. This is not necessarily a problem, but it becomes a problem when the tone diverges too much and creates the impression that different things are being discussed.

The third point is differences in topic selection. The local level sometimes emphasizes what is most important in the local community, while the central level emphasizes the broader context. In a networked environment, audiences read these differences in parallel, which can trigger an interpretation of inconsistency. (Hepp, 2013; Hjarvard, 2008)

The fourth point is the spillover of internal information into the public sphere. When internal information becomes public, the institution faces a dual challenge: it must protect the internal process while also publicly responding to information that is already shaping the narrative.

The fifth point is crisis situations. Crises amplify all of the above differences: pressure for speed increases, emotional tension rises, and audiences expect clear and quick answers. A crisis is therefore a situation in which the balance between ad intra and ad extra communication must be managed particularly thoughtfully.

4.1. Illustrative mini case study: a call for solidarity within a humanitarian action

To illustrate in practical terms the tension between inward-oriented communication (*ad intra*) and outward-oriented communication (*ad extra*), this paper introduces an illustrative mini case study: a call for solidarity within a humanitarian action. Such actions simultaneously require a clear public message (empathy, a call to unity, credibility) and internal coordination (verified channels of assistance, logistics, responsible persons and harmonized guidance across levels). In a networked environment, this dual demand is intensified because audiences expect fast and understandable information, while information spreads quickly, is commented on and reshaped. (Hepp, 2013; Hjarvard, 2008) The mini study is conceived as an analytical illustration rather than a formal empirical study. The comparison is conducted across three levels of institutional communication that are often visible in digital space: (1) the central level, (2) the national level, and (3) the local level (community/parish). The focus is on how the same intention—a call for solidarity—is translated into different emphases, tone and degrees of concretization, and where typical points of communicational noise emerge. (Pontifical Council for Social Communications, 2002)

The central level typically frames the message as a universal template: it emphasizes closeness to those affected, solidarity, unity and the value-based dimension of assistance, while being cautious in stating details that are not yet verified. The tone is calm and dignified, and the call to action is most often general (an appeal for solidarity, prayer, moral support). Such a message stabilizes identity and sets reference emphases that other levels adopt.

The national level most often acts as a bridge between the value framework and operational implementation. It adopts the core message, but ties it to the community context and directs it toward verified channels of assistance. It is precisely here that the balance between *ad intra* and *ad extra* becomes visible: the message is publicly addressed, yet at the same time it serves coordination and standardization of conduct (e.g., a single channel for collecting aid, an appeal to verified information, a call to local levels to participate in an organized manner).

The local level turns the call for solidarity into concrete steps: it states the place and time for collecting aid, the types of donations needed, contact persons and logistics, often in a more immediate, emotionally close tone. It is precisely here that the greatest risk of communicational noise appears: parallel channels of assistance that are not aligned with verified institutional mechanisms, sharing unverified information, or a tone that the public may understand as inappropriate intensification or politicization. On the other hand, well-managed local communication can be crucial for the effectiveness of a humanitarian action because it mobilizes the community and translates the general appeal into concrete action. Comparative observation of these levels shows that balance is most often built around three questions: (1) timeliness of response while maintaining credibility, (2) unity of key emphases with permitted local concreteness, and (3) transparency toward the public with a clear internal allocation of responsibility. When these elements are aligned, the solidarity message remains recognizable across levels, while also becoming concrete enough to lead to real assistance.

4.2. Bridge: from illustration to principles of balance

The illustrative mini case study of a humanitarian action shows how two communication logics are activated simultaneously in a networked environment: an internal logic that

requires coordination, verified channels and a clear allocation of responsibility, and a public logic that must be timely, understandable and oriented toward building trust. In humanitarian actions, it becomes especially clear that the balance between ad intra and ad extra communication is not achieved only through good intentions or a strong emotional message, but through a clear framework that allows the universal call for solidarity to be translated into concrete steps without losing consistency. (Hepp, 2013; Hjarvard, 2008; Suchman, 1995; Fombrun, 1996)

The mini case also points to typical places where communicational noise arises: different rhythms of posts across levels, differences in tone and level of detail, and the risk of opening parallel aid channels that are not aligned with verified institutional mechanisms. This implies that effective multi-level communication in humanitarian actions can be built on several practical principles: a single value framework preserved across levels, clear reference to verified aid channels, designation of responsible persons for information at the local level, and a predictable rhythm of public updates. On that basis, the following section presents principles and guidelines that can reduce message inconsistency and increase clarity and credibility of communication.

5. TOWARDS A BALANCE FRAMEWORK: PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICAL GUIDELINES

At this point, the paper proposes a balance framework that can be summarized through several principles.

The first principle is the unity-of-message principle with permitted contextualization. Unity of message does not mean that every post must be identical; it means that key messages and value emphases must not cancel each other out. Local contextualization is legitimate and often necessary, but it must remain consistent with the basic framework.

The second principle is timeliness with accountability. Speed of response matters, but it must not undermine accountability. This points to the need for clear protocols: when the local level may respond independently and when it must escalate the message to a higher level before publishing.

The third principle is transparency with process protection. Transparency does not mean that all internal information is publicly disclosed; it means that the public receives an understandable and fair frame: what is known, what is being verified, what the next steps are, and when further information can be expected.

The fourth principle is dialogue. The networked environment encourages interaction. An institution communicating in digital space must expect questions, uncertainties and reactions. The dialogical element does not mean “handing over” the message; it means recognizing legitimate public questions and answering them in understandable language. (Pontifical Council for Social Communications, 2002)

Based on these principles, practical guidelines can be proposed, which are particularly useful for the first phase of Jure’s doctoral work:

Minimum clarity standard: each public post should, in one sentence, say what the message is and to whom it is addressed.

Minimum timeliness standard: in sensitive situations, it is better to quickly provide an initial statement (“we are aware, we are verifying, we will inform you”) than to remain silent.

Escalation protocol: define in advance which topics require prior coordination with a higher level, and which topics the local level can handle independently.

Unified “key emphases”: for more important topics, define three to five key emphases that must not be lost across levels.

Channel differentiation: internal instructions and coordination should have their own clear channel and rhythm; the public channel should be stable and recognizable.

Crisis “first response”: prepare a template for a first response that does not prejudge facts but demonstrates responsibility and direction.

Learning from cases: after sensitive situations, conduct a brief internal evaluation—what worked, where noise emerged, and how to avoid it.

These guidelines are not a final “manual”, but a basis for empirical testing and further elaboration in the dissertation.

6. LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper is a review and conceptual-analytical study, with an illustrative mini case study that serves as an example of a typical flow of a message across levels of institutional communication in a networked environment. In that sense, the paper does not provide a systematic empirical study or generalizable findings based on a large corpus; rather, it offers a theoretical framework, identifies key tensions and provides practical guidelines grounded in analytical elaboration and illustration. (Hepp, 2013; Hjarvard, 2008)

A limitation of this approach is that individual insights may vary depending on the national, media and cultural context and on the specifics of the particular situation. However, the value of the review approach lies in clearly differentiating the functions of ad intra and ad extra communication and defining the points at which communicational noise most often appears, which provides a solid foundation for the future continuation of the doctoral work. In further research, the mini study can be expanded into a more systematic design through comparative analysis of public posts across multiple levels and in different cases, as well as through interviews with persons responsible for communication, so that the proposed framework can be additionally examined and developed into a practically applicable model for coordinating multi-level institutional communication.

7. CONCLUSION

The balance between inward-oriented communication (ad intra) and outward-oriented communication (ad extra) is becoming one of the key issues for multi-level institutions in a networked environment. The Catholic Church, as a globally structured system, faces increased pressures of speed, audience fragmentation and secondary interpretation of messages. Under such conditions, the boundary between the internal and the public becomes more porous, and communicational noise most often arises from differences in posting rhythm, tone, level of concreteness, and in crisis situations. (Hepp, 2013; Hjarvard, 2008; Coombs, 2007; Benoit, 1995)

This review paper has offered a conceptual framework for understanding tensions between confidentiality and transparency, hierarchical coordination and the need for rapid response, and between a universal message and local contextualization. The illustrative mini case study of a humanitarian action further showed how the same call for solidarity is translated across communication levels: from a value framework, through coordination of verified aid channels, to local concretization and mobilization of the community.

Based on the analysis, principles and guidelines were highlighted that can contribute to more consistent, timely and credible institutional communication: preserving a unified value framework, clearly referencing verified channels, defining responsibilities and maintaining a predictable rhythm of informing. In this way, the paper contributes both to the theoretical understanding of multi-level communication and to the practical orientation

of communication practices in the digital age, with a clear perspective for future elaboration within the doctoral research.

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