The Man in Google Glasses: A Reflection on the Ethics of Networking and Governance in the Society of Jesus

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> That word, 'networking,' so often used these days, is, in fact, typical, of the 'new world' in which we live – a world which has as its 'principal new feature,' what Pope Benedict XVI calls 'the explosion of worldwide interdependence, commonly known as globalization.[1]
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> The context [of globalization] requires us to act as a universal body with a universal mission, realizing at the same time the radical diversity of our situations. It is as a worldwide community – and, simultaneously, as a network of local communities – that we seek to serve others across the world.[2]

To quote Anne-Marie Slaughter, former dean of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University, we live in a "networked world" courtesy of Google and their www.com partners.[3] This world functions by creating ever-expanding, loosely circumscribed webs of contacts and connections to maximize the sharing of information, resources, and services. The idea is to help the networkers (individuals, communities, and institutions) add value to their final output, however this latter is defined. In a globalized, post-modern context, such as we know it today, networking is not a fixed idea; it is characterized by changeability, flexibility, and adaptability. Not only does it fundamentally shift the way of doing "business", broadly conceived, it also alters the mode of thinking and patterns of relating within

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[1] Adolfo Nicolás, "Depth, Universality, and Learned Ministry: Challenges to Jesuit Higher Education Today" (Mexico City, April 23, 2010), p. 2.

[2] General Congregation 35, D. 2, no. 20.

[3] Ken Auletta, *Googled: The End of the World as We Know It* (London: Virgin Books, 2010), pp. 285-86.

and among institutions and communities, as they become increasingly electronically "wired" or networked.

The term "networking" appears rarely if ever in the documents of the Society of Jesus prior to General Congregation 35.[4] The latter extols the extraordinary potential and benefits of networking for the Society as an "international and multicultural" institution.[5] As Father Adolfo Nicolás puts it, "the 35th General Congregation also saw our interconnectedness as the new context for understanding the world and discerning our mission."[6]

In his extremely insightful book, *Heroic Leadership*, Chris Lowney provides some evidence that demonstrates the centrality, albeit implicitly, of the idea of networking to the *modo de preceder* of the 450-year-old company known as the Society of Jesus.[7] The missionary impetus to scale uncharted frontiers and establish apostolic institutions across the globe in the foundational years of the Society followed a coordinated pattern, the outcome of which, it should be said, was not always predictable. Nonetheless, early in its history, "the tiny Jesuit company had somehow found itself committed to a string of outposts in what are today India, Malaysia,

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[4] One could argue that the general idea and necessity of networking had been circulating in Jesuit documents in a variety of contexts: "interprovincial cooperation" (GC 31, D. 48), "union of minds and hearts" (GC 32, D. 11); international cooperation among Jesuits in the area of international justice "as intellectuals, organizers, and spiritual leaders, and by their witness of non-violence" (GC 33, D.1, no. 46); "interprovincial and supra-provincial cooperation" and universality of our mission or "the international character of our mission" (GC 34, D. 21). Both GC 34 and GC 35 made the poignant observation that "today many problems are global in nature and therefore require global solutions" (GC 35 D. 5, no. 17, quoting GC 34, D. 21 and Complementary Norms no. 395, par. 1). Two decades earlier, Father Peter-Hans Kolvenbach had lamented that "we do not exploit all the possibilities given to us by being an international apostolic body" (Address to the Congregation of Provincials, 1990).

[5] GC 35, D. 3, no. 43.

[6] Nicolás, "Depth, Universality, and Learned Ministry," p. 2.

[7] Chris Lowney, *Heroic Leadership* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2003).

Indonesia, Japan, and the Persian Gulf port of Hormuz."[8] Chief among the institutions dotting these outposts were schools that soon came to be "understood not simply as one ministry among many, but as a super-category equivalent to that into which all the other *consueta ministeria* fell."[9] Centuries after the first schools were opened, this apostolic sector remains better placed to offer some of the most exciting and creative opportunities for networking in view of realizing more effectively "the universality which has always been part of Ignatius' vision of the Society."[10]

A new idea?

It bears repeating, however, that although implied in the organizational configuration and apostolic operations of the nascent Society, the concept of networking is not native to Jesuit or Ignatian apostolic vocabulary. The Society recognizes the importance of "communication technologies" in the globalized context of its ministry that make networking both possible and vital for realizing its mission.[11] Nowadays international mission, ministry, and collaboration readily come to mind when the term is used. In the world of digitalized information communication technology, where it is at home and most recognizable, networking evokes a plethora of jargons, activities, and processes: platforms, systems, paths, data, transfer, suites, backbone, routers, hubs.…

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[8] Lowney, *Heroic Leadership,* p. 134.

[9] John O'Malley, *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 200 ff.

[10] Nicolás, "Depth, Universality, and Learned Ministry," p. 7.

[11] GC 35, D. 3, no. 29.

A caveat is in order here. An ICT-digitalized conceptualization of networking carries a risk: essentially it generates a reductionist understanding. In other words, it creates an illusion of intense group interactions; at the same time, in reality, it reinforces alienation and individualism. The net result is the loss of "the ability to engage with reality."[12] As we say in Eastern Africa, people meet, mountains don't. Or, to adapt Bertrand Russell's quote for the purposes of this argument, no matter how efficiently a race of networked computers may function, they cannot tell you that their parents were poor, but honest![13] The point is simple: the electronic sandbox of digitalized networking does not exhaust the full range of contexts, meaning, and functioning of networking.

In the larger sense of the term, networking creates communities, enables sharing, and connects people with intentionality, interests, and benefits. Intentionality, because of a pre-established need or necessity to connect with others: people link to or participate in a network because they want or see the need to. Interest and benefit, because of a perceived set of favorable outcomes that influence and accrue from the choice to participate in or join a network. There is something in it for people who join a network. Thus, alongside a technology and sociology of networking, there exists a politics of networking. When we join, who we join, where we join, and why we join – all result from a prior definition of intent, perception of interests, and calculation of benefits. Yet the presumption that networking is beneficial in any field of endeavor and in a multiplicity of combinations and permutations – from business to geo-politics, atheism to terrorism, advertising to advocacy, prostitution to religion, etc – needs to be carefully

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[12] Nicolás, "Depth, Universality, and Learned Ministry," p. 3.

[13] "No matter how eloquently a dog may bark, he cannot tell you that his parents were poor, but honest."

examined before being made the basis of the re-conceptualization of governance in the Society of Jesus.

As I see it, oftentimes, in the Society, the impetus toward networking seems a matter of persuasion and encouragement – that apostolic institutions, like schools and social centers, ought to collaborate; provinces need to cooperate, and supra-provincial entities should work together. The fact of collaborating, cooperating, and working together runs the risk of failure if the prior processes and factors – such as outlined above – are not attended to. To these should be added two key components of networking.

Networking needs content; it involves the sharing of information, resources, and services. Devoid of content, networking resembles bewildering whorls of particularities rather than a symphony of creative energies and synergies. The latter offers the Society the possibility of a wide(er) circulation or distribution of information, resources, and services across its global network of apostolic institutions.

Networking needs a hub or a facilitator. If understood as a community of interested participants, networking presupposes a hub. In the present context of globalization, what I am calling a hub looks more like multiple centers of actions and initiatives, not exclusively subject to the control and manipulation of a centralizing authority. Lowney poignantly articulates this idea when he notes that governance in the Society functions "with authority radiating from a strong hub to many spokes."[14]

In light of the foregoing, I would like to explore four features of networking and their ethical implications for governance in the Society.

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[14] Lowney, *Heroic Leadership,* 162.

Community vs. Space. Networking is analogous to the process of creating and building community. I have mentioned above that networking creates a community of interests. As used here, the notion of community needs to be further nuanced. In the world of geeks, nerds, and techies, what passes for (social) networking resembles adolescents hobnobbing in a digital coop, where meeting is virtual and making and unmaking "friends" fleeting and perfunctory. The concomitant isolation, alienation, fragmentation, and exclusion have pernicious impact on the concept and experience of community.[15]

The paradox of instant connection and intense isolation in a networked world is best epitomized by Google's Project Glass.[16] The man in Google glasses is a caricature of a networker. He appears to inhabit a world of infinite connectivity, accessibility, and possibilities, but only on the scale of his field of vision. In other words, the contours of his world hardly extend beyond his nose. It is devoid of binding, human ties and anything resembling a communal experience. The breadth of his electronic connectivity bares the depth of his personal isolation.

Interestingly, despite the risk of Google's Project Glass vitrifying human relationships via technologies of communication, the man in Google glasses makes a revolutionary revelation: properly construed, the ultimate goal of networking is to create a *space* not a community. In this space without borders, the old ponderous rules of cosmology evaporate into effortless, timeless, and limitless 'virtuality'. Thus, unlike the analog community, where authority and power descend from the top of the pyramid to the base or the masses, networking creates a space, where multiple interactions, encounters, and participations happen. Everybody is a player or a networker; everybody gives and everybody gets.

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[15] See GC 35, D. 3, no. 11.

[16] "Project Glass: One day…", http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9c6W4CCU9M4

The shift from community to space has implications for governance. It relativizes the perception and exercise of authority in any setting, governance included. Yet it needs to be said that if networking offers us the possibility of an expansive, horizontal worldview, the sustainability of this worldview depends on the relative depth of its core values. In this sense, networking poses a particular challenge to governance in the Society and the Church: the quest for a broader worldview or space must be complemented by an equally consistent pursuit of rootedness, values, and principles. The absence of depth raises the specter of networking collapsing into an exercise in "globalization of superficiality," that perniciously shortchanges "the laborious, painstaking work of serious, critical thinking" and makes "it impossible to feel compassion for the suffering of others." [17] Herein lies a critical task of governance in a networked world: to promote a "depth of thought and imagination in the Ignatian tradition [that] involves a profound engagement with the real."[18] In this sense, its role resembles that of a facilitator or hub that was alluded to above.

Internal justice vs. internal inequalities. As mentioned above, there is such a thing as the politics of networking, implying the power to control the process and flow of information, resources, and services, on the one hand, and the power to regulate participation, on the other. The level of participation is proportionate to the amount of information, resources, and services contributed. These are hardly ever possessed in fair, just, and equal measures.

In the Society of Jesus, one of the byproducts of the demographic shift is the widening gap between the haves and the have nots: between fund-rich, personnel-poor provinces/regions

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[17] Nicolás, "Depth, Universality, and Learned Ministry," p. 2, p. 3.

[18] Nicolás, "Depth, Universality, and Learned Ministry," p. 7.

and fund-poor, personnel-rich provinces. If networking is to deliver its promises equitably, the Society's leadership will have to give careful attention and consideration to the pertinent ethical question of inequalities of (access to) resources. Here I see as crucial the task of realigning resources to match demographic growth and foster apostolic creativity. It is a governance issue, because only a mode of governance based on the networking of ideas, creativity, and expertise in mission and ministry is best placed to assume this task.

Networking Solidarity. As a cherished concept of Catholic Social Teaching, solidarity bears implications for networking in the Church and in the Society. I have made the point that networking presupposes intentionality. It is not inconceivable that networking will create a field of attraction *only* among entities – say provinces and churches – of comparable economic resources, cultural affinity, and apostolic interests. If it is to be effective in the Society and the Church, networking cannot be simply a process or activity limited to a group of like-minded people or institutions, no matter how well-intentioned they may be. It should cut across geo-political divide, both vertically (North-South) and horizontally (South-South). Governance serves to recall and insist on solidarity as an indispensible principle of networking information, resources, services in the Society.

At issue here is what Pope Benedict XVI has designated as "globalization of solidarity."[19] He argues that "the Church is eager to see the globalization of solidarity progress to the point where it inscribes 'in commercial relationships the principle of gratuitousness and the logic of gift as an expression of fraternity', while avoiding the temptation to regard globalization as the

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[19] Pope Benedict XVI, *Africae Munus* (Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation), November 2011, no. 87.

only lens through which to view life, culture, politics and the economy, and fostering an ongoing ethical respect for the variety of human situations in the interests of effective solidarity."[20]

Subsidiarity: worldwide community vs. network of local communities. This point is closely linked to the two preceding points. There is a power differential implied in the practice and process of networking. A minimum ethical imperative requires that participation should enhance the capacity of networkers at their point of contact or entry. The aim of networking is to strengthen capacity and enable capabilities at local level. A real danger of networking is to create a behemoth, an unwieldy, faceless, and rampant system of control and manipulation mimicking efficiency, but, in reality, exploiting and stifling local initiatives, creativity, and energies, while maximizing benefits. Institutions like the Society and the Church manifest a strong penchant for preserving tradition, a *certain* way of proceeding that could mask a tyranny of universality. An excessive focus on the universal as a tool of control not only weakens local effectiveness, but also renders the desired streamlining, modernization, and flexibility of governance structures more intractable.

Maintaining a healthy balance between (global) authority and (local) initiative is one of the crucial tasks of governance in a networked world. At its best Jesuit governance thrives on subsidiarity. Recognizing personal/local initiatives, enabling personal/local capabilities, engendering personal/local imagination, and fostering personal/local creativity are hallmarks of the Jesuit brand of governance. As Lowney describes it, in this brand, "innovation and creativity happen when individuals enjoy a wide berth and the managerial support to take risks and experiment. But speed and a global mindset often require the opposite: a centralized authority to

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[20] Pope Benedict XVI, *Africae Munus*, no. 86.

weigh opportunities and mobilize resources quickly against emerging opportunities. In other words, speed, innovation, and global focus happen only when lots of delegated authority sits alongside lots of centralized authority."[21] Keeping this tension alive in a creative manner is an ongoing task of governance in the Society.

Conclusion: ethics of networking

The upshot of the foregoing is that if there is a politics of networking, there is an equally important ethics of networking. In the context of the Society and the Church, this ethics should concern us more – much more that the materiality of networking. If the latter is also about promoting the reign of God in church and society, in religious and secular spheres, or more accurately, in the world, its effectiveness would be more readily guaranteed when shaped by a consistent ethics, the ingredients of which would include: community/space-as-depth, mutuality, solidarity, and subsidiarity. The apostolic, governance, and formational structures of the Society provide concrete testing grounds for experimenting and shaping the ethics of networking on a global scale.

Father Adolfo Nicolás has made the point that networking is a transformative methodology. In developing this open-ended methodology of change and transformation, conflict is inevitable between the old, analog, and hierarchical *community* and a new, digital, and virtual *space sans frontier*. However, as I have argued, networking is not limited to the domain of digital information communication technology. As a methodology, it is adaptable to a variety of areas of human endeavor. This methodology has triggered fundamental and irreversible changes in the world of media, business, politics, and economics. Recent events in world politics

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[21] Lowney, *Heroic Leadership,* 164.

underline the efficacy of social networking in rallying dissidents across the globe to topple a string of dictatorial and authoritarian regimes on a scale that would have been unimaginable only a couple of decades ago.

In a networked or "Googled" world, Jesuits, their institutions and structures of governance, are not immune to the concomitant tension between traditional community and virtual space. Increasingly, a new generation of Jesuits across the globe find themselves more at home in this space, mingling freely with a global virtual community on social networking sites (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, myspace, Linkedin, flickr, etc) and blogospheres, but also taking advantage of technologies provided by these networking sites to package, market, and deliver innovative forms of ministry. A revolution is happening as we imbibe the rules of engagement in a worldwide space that promises us an unlimited "possibility for greater service."[22] Critical discernment is needed not only to distinguish and test these rules, but also to apply them creatively to the mission of the Society of Jesus for the greater glory of God.

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[22] Nicolás, "Depth, Universality, and Learned Ministry," p. 7.