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The Words of Ethics across the Media in a Time of Pandemic

From Misinformation to Solidarity

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Abstract

In such a peculiar time as the one we are living in now due to the COVID-19 public health emergency, our perception of risk and uncertainty have exponentially grown. The media have changed their lexicon, redefining some of their keywords, and have taken *ad hoc* communication strategies. Such a new communication narrative requires an ethical reflection, which should spur us to move along the pivotal principles of behaving "well" in a social context where everyone's behavior takes on paramount

importance, as it can make all the difference in lessening and/or expanding the risk of contagion; misinformation can also do likewise. It goes without saying that this means values and principles such as awareness, (joint) responsibility, and trust, which may strengthen the relationship among individuals (experts and ordinary citizens), institutions, and media for a new sense of community built on mutual solidarity. "Good" communication, built on such concepts, can with regard to the contemporary individualistic atomism crucially contribute to an increase in awareness and extend a true sense of support for the sake of public welfare in our taking care for ourselves as well as for others not only as individuals, but above all as a community.

Keywords: communication, community, ethics, trust, responsibility, media, solidarity.

Medijsko posredovane besede etike v času pandemije. Od napačnih informacij do solidarnosti

Povzetek

V nenavadnih časih, v kakršnih živimo sedaj spričo stiske javnega zdravstva, ki jo je povzročila bolezen COVID-19, se naše zaznavanje tveganja in negotovosti eksponentno stopnjuje. Mediji so spremenili svoje slovarje in nekatere ključne besede opredelili drugače, pri čemer se poslužujejo *ad hoc* komunikacijskih strategij. Takšen nov komunikacijski narativ zahteva etično refleksijo, ki naj bi nas spodbudila k spoštovanju osrednjih načel »dobrega obnašanja« v družbenem kontekstu, v katerem je vedênje slehernega od nas odločilnega pomena, saj lahko bistveno prispeva k zmanjševanju in/ali povečevanju tveganja za okužbo; tudi napačne informacije lahko storijo enako. Seveda to vključuje vrednote in načela, kakršna so ozaveščenost, (skupna) odgovornost in zaupanje, ki lahko okrepijo razmerja med posamezniki (strokovnjaki in navadnimi državljani), ustanovami ter mediji in tako součinkujejo pri vzpostavljanju novega občutka za skupnost, zgrajeno na medsebojni solidarnosti. »Dobra« komunikacija, utemeljena na takšnih pojmih, lahko, zlasti z ozirom na sodobni individualistični atomizem, ključno prispeva k povečanju ozaveščenosti in ponudi resnično podporo javni dobrobiti pri – ne samo posameznikovem, temveč skupnostnem – zagotavljanju oskrbe zase in skrbi za drugega.

Ključne besede: komunikacija, skupnost, etika, zaupanje, odgovornost, mediji, solidarnost.

1. Premises

Nowadays, as an increasingly global and composite society is taking shape in all dimensions of life (economy, environment, public health, culture, and welfare), individuals feel shrouded in a climate of uncertainty and an increasing fear of risk, which they try to fight on their own. Today's concerns for the worldwide public health threat have pushed such trends even further.[1]

Thus far, the so-called "society of individuals," which has replaced the 20th-century "mass society," has invested onto itself also the fear of others, risking a radical weakening of the relational dimension. The atomistic individualism, focused on the self-affirmation of the individual, has slowly eroded the role of community and the social bonds that have been its distinctive feature over the course of history (Taylor 1993). And, with the COVID-19 public health crisis, individual choices can sometimes have unpredictable consequences, involving risks—but, as we will see, opportunities as well—for the lives of other individuals or for society as a whole that are beyond our control and our full awareness. The "desire for community" that Bauman reflected upon much earlier than the pandemic, now seems to respond to the perception of this new global fragility within the media universe that has been revolutionized by the internet, where communication (institutional, social, commercial, and, above all, scientific-public health communication) can spread as quickly as uncontrollably and sometimes even misleadingly (Bauman 2001; Bauman 2007; Fistetti 2003).

In such a context, the pandemic is questioning society about the need for a new civil *ethos*, the individual's active and conscious participation in responding to the expansion of risk and uncertainty. Now, unlike in the past (and the earlier pandemics), the paradigms of the media, which are unquestionably those most responsible for strengthening and/or weakening people's vulnerabilities and fears, have changed. Nowadays, the media can

1 Even if a feeling of uncertainty has always been the human being's constant companion, the current public health crisis has sharpened such a feeling, because, at least in the Western world, it immediately followed a time of prosperity and financial security (Millefiorini 2015, 288–291, 240; Beck 2000; Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994; Sennett 1998; Giddens 1994; Inglehart 1998; Ignazi and Urbinati 2020; Parsi 2020).

create bubbles of knowledge, guide public opinion, and "mask" or sensationalize facts, sometimes unbeknownst to users. And in such circumstances, they act by changing the narrative modes of information—focused on statistics, numbers, expert opinions, and emotions—and the lexicon, according to the public-health and epidemiological semantics.

A reflection inspired by communication ethics plays, therefore, a key role in the truly responsible behavior. In the early days of the pandemic, we saw institutional communication use some of the keywords of ethics, partly redefined in their general meaning. A sort of reminder—like an advertising slogan—of the suspended time we are living in and of the removal of some fundamental freedoms, which are protected by constitutional charters (something that raises a few questions, in terms of legitimacy and effectiveness). It is an inducement to an ethical behavior for the protection of oneself and of others, as part of oneself. This leads to using a lexicon that speaks of cohesion and reciprocity. And it is interesting to look at the way such concepts, conveyed by and in the media—especially in public service announcements and commercial advertisements, as the case of Italy has shown—, have strengthened people's feeling of belonging to their community, spurred by the deepest motivations that should lead people to behave responsibly. Communicative action has moved in multiple directions, involving citizens, experts, and institutions: the more personal one, from individuals (often the most emotional), the one from the institutions, to inform and give guidelines, the commercial one to buy things that are in keeping with the new living requirements, and, lastly, the one from the experts who communicate objectively—based on Bacon's idea of science for the benefit of all mankind—to reduce the feeling of insecurity and increase that of mutual trust (Greco 2017, 28).

The ethical connotation, which has been given to some terms in such forms of communication, involves all those dimensions and is by now becoming part, not so much of the communicative lexicon, but, rather, at a deeper level, of a new social imagery, based on conscious knowledge and, therefore, on responsible and mutually supportive action. And the sense and reasons that lead us to make a definite choice deeply depend on our expressive and defining abilities. When one uses language, one opens up to others, to a common space, and a meaning is given to words through a shared universe of values (Taylor 2016).

2. Risk and uncertainty. The role of the media amidst experts, citizens, and institutions

The risk of contagion and the uncertainty about its spreading are threats, which, as Beck wrote before the public health emergency, have always belonged to the human condition. The semantics of risk is not new, and "refers to the present thematization of future threats that are often a product of the successes of civilization" (Beck 2011, 9). And it is precisely on the successes of civilization, on the individualistic approach based on individual profit and personal fulfilment, like a kind of radicalization of the *homo ad circulum* of the Renaissance, that attention should be focused. Risk has two faces: one is unexpected danger, the other one opens up new opportunities, such as, for instance, the ability to predict and control. But the pandemic threat can mainly be kept in check if it is taken as an opportunity, as a change of perspective in human behavior. If risk, as Beck goes on to say, "is the model of perception and thought of the mobilizing dynamics of a society that is confronted with the openness, the uncertainties, and the blocks of a manufactured future, and no longer clings to religion, tradition, or to the dominance of nature, but has also lost its faith in the salvific force of utopias" (Beck 2011, 10), then the media thematization, the choice of a code and channel of communication, and the strategies for spreading messages can be additional spheres of knowledge (or sometimes pseudo-knowledge) and, above all, of choice. Nevertheless, paradoxically enough, the further the science goes, the less worthy becomes the authority of experts, so overexposed that, it would seem, they are not always heeded. As if a sort of scientific *information overload* would have happened. And, conversely, as Nichols writes:

> The fact of the matter is that we cannot function without admitting the limits of our knowledge and trusting in the expertise of others. We sometimes resist this conclusion because it undermines our sense of independence and autonomy. We want to believe we are capable of making all kinds of decisions, and we chafe at the person who corrects us, or tells us we're wrong, or instructs us in things we don't understand. This

> natural human reaction among individuals is dangerous when it becomes a shared characteristic among entire societies. (Nichols 2017, 15)

The mistrust of experts is certainly not new in the history of thought. Since the time of Socrates, experts have been mistrusted so many times. As De Tocqueville noted, in 1835 the Americans relied more on individual efforts than on the theories of the most authoritative intellectuals: "It is not only confidence in this or that man which is then destroyed, but the taste for trusting the ipse dixit of any man whatsoever." (Nichols 2017, 17; De Tocqueville 1863) One is led to think that anyone, through the internet and a smartphone, may become an expert.[2] Much earlier than the internet, Ortega y Gasset defined the masses as arrogant and self-assuming as if he would feel "the progressive triumph of the pseudo-intellectuals, unqualified, unqualifiable and, by their very mental texture, disqualified […]" (Ortega y Gasset 1957, 16).

Thus, on the one hand, there is less focus on knowledge and experts and, on the other hand, we are deluged with such a variety of information that we might end up with low levels of knowledge, since the belief has spread that all opinions are equally good, and, without a critical understanding of the authority of the sources, such—often unconscious—attitude is powerfully corroborated in the internet (Somin 2015 and 2016). A primarily American phenomenon, which has then spread all over the world, was born as the stance of learned and highly-educated individuals who think that, in some areas, they know more than the experts. As it has recently happened with vaccines across the world. The public opinion thoroughly looks for the experts' mistakes to deprive them of their authority. Knowledge is exclusive, the more you are an expert in one area, the less specialized you are in another, and you begin to exclude nonexperts from your reflections. While anyone can potentially carry on with one's inexperience,

2 As Nichols writes, an expert is someone who has "'comprehensive' and 'authoritative' knowledge, which is another way of describing people whose command of a subject means that the information they provide the rest of us is true and can be trusted. Their opinions are likelier than those of non-experts. They are certainly people who have received a certain education, who have a certain aptitude for and experience in the subject they are expert in, and whose knowledge is tested and proven by people who are as expert as they are." (Nichols 2017, 29–30)

everyone should trust the accredited experience of others, for a really functioning and civilized community (Barrotta and Gronda 2019).

3. Communicative ethics amidst responsibility, awareness, and trust in (un)certain community

Thus, applied ethics, and specifically communication ethics, steps in to help experts (increasingly overexposed in the media), citizens, and institutions regain and maintain trust in each other. In the face of the pandemic, the world of communication had the opportunity to readjust its dynamics. Shrouded in such emergency, people did and do need information that is truthful, never ambiguous, correct, and accessible to (and intelligible by) everybody. Such an opportunity has not always turned into reality. Communication has the power to provide guidelines on behaviors and values, and, in these circumstances, it accomplishes this by exploiting our vulnerabilities, our fears, as well as our expectations and hopes.

In this context, the principles and values that good communication is built upon cannot but be based on awareness and responsibility, leading towards a reinstatement of the sense of community (and, therefore, of mutual respect) that has gone lost in the modern age. Principles that can create a bond of trust that lasts even after the public health emergency, but that, just because of it, become and are perceived as necessary principles to come out or try to come out of the pandemic and the crisis it has triggered. Therefore, it seems essential, first and foremost, to briefly mention the meanings of the concepts, to which the media have focused their attention, not in order to regulate everyone's lives down to the tiniest details, more than is needed, with even stricter protocols. This is the concept of responsibility that is born of awareness and, quite paradoxically, of modern individualism and the ensuing culture of authenticity. As well as of the "desire for community" that recalls another keyword, i.e., mutual trust (between individuals, but mostly in the community), even more so in the relational complexity, in which we have to communicate and cooperate today.

While it can be detrimental to the resolution of the pandemic, individualism embraces authenticity, which—following in Taylor's footsteps—looks like a demand for a radical transparency of the self to create ethical, responsible social relationships.

> Authenticity points us towards a more self-responsible form of life. It allows us to live (potentially) a fuller and more differentiated life, because more fully appropriated as our own. There are dangers. […] When we succumb to these, it may be that we fall in some respects below what we would have been had this culture never developed. But at its best authenticity allows a richer mode of existence. […] authenticity opens an age of responsibilization […]. By the very fact that thus culture develops, people are made more self-responsible. (Taylor 1991, 86 and 90).

But what does behaving responsibly mean in the context of the current public health emergency?

First, the meanings that are deeply rooted in the Latin etymology of the noun, "responsibility," should be mentioned. The word recalls the Latin predicate *respondeo*, which implies the meaning of responding, formed by the prefix *re-* and the verb *spondeo*, suggesting a mutual pledge (Miano 2010, 7).

The noun also recalls the association between *rem*, the accusative singular of *res*, "thing," and the verb *ponderare*, the individual's ability to appraise a given situation; but it also recalls the predicate *re-sponsare*, in the sense of "resisting" to someone even when the latter behaves inappropriately or in a way that is unsuited to the context; or, again, *re-spicere*, formed by the prefix *re-*, "back," and the verb *spicio*, "to look," that is, "looking back" or "having regard for." It is the latter sense that reveals a connection between responsibility and risk management, making assumptions about a possible future. The conceptual *focus* shifts from the performer of the action to the other party, who asks to be protected and taken charge of.

With regard to the specific meanings that derive from *respondeo*, the first one is "answering *to*" something or someone, the second one is "'answering' something or someone," the third one is instead "'answering *for*' something or someone," accounting for them and accepting the consequences (Fabris 2014, 52–57; Fabris 2018).[3] In the light of such triple variants, responsibility may

3 As to the multiple suppositions of the concept of responsibility, especially in connection with its English variants, *responsibility* (associated with the sense of having

be defined as a relationship, in which there is a responsible person who acts, responsibility as a dimension, and finally the person/entity one is responsible to. This meaning emphasizes the connection between the idea of causality and the idea of responsibility as to the cause of a given response. The supposition that is most closely associated with "answering for" is the one connected with the concept of the juridical nature of liability. But what seems most relevant, nowadays, is responsibility from a predictive perspective regarding the consequences of actions, as explained, for instance, by Jonas's "principle of responsibility," formulated as follows: "Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life […]." The pandemic imposes a reflection on the ultimate *consequences* of one's actions, which must pursue the "continuity of human life in the future" (Jonas 2002, 16–17). One's behavior must be rethought according to the specific values that guide the present actions. First and foremost, it is the relational, inter-subjective, and mutual nature of responsibility that becomes essential, here, as it implies a relation with someone else and transcends the (inward or outward) judging entity. As Ricoeur writes, I am responsible for the other who is in my charge, transcending the relationship between the agent and receiver of the action (Ricoeur 2005, 108).

Besides such concepts, there exist the meanings of "answering to" and of "answering someone," *à la* Derrida, which denotes that one always answers "to" someone, to a community, to an institution, but one also answers "someone" (Derrida 1996, 294). In accordance with Levinas, answering someone else's call, makes the Self get out of its self-reference and embrace otherness; this meaning is nowadays more relevant than ever (Levinas 1991).

The ramifications of responsibility are enriched by additional nuances, in the light of the *new media* and their independence, the unpredictability and immeasurability of the consequences of our communicative actions. Appealing to a principle of caution and risk assessment, becomes, therefore, even more

to do something), *answerability* (in the sense of being responsible for what happens), *liability* (more similar to a legal responsibility for something) and *attributability* (whose sphere of action is related to its character), see: Hart 1968; Miano 2010, 7–8; Franco 2015; Vincent 2011, 5–35; Fisher and Tognazzini 2011, 381–417; Raffoul 2010; Bagnoli 2019, 11).

important, as it is based on "strong evaluations," on choosing qualitatively based on a moral hierarchy for the benefit of individuals and society (Taylor 2004, 49–85).

The inter-subjective and interpersonal meaning of responsibility recalls, therefore, the taking charge of the other as part of a relationship between me and the other or others who have been entrusted to me or whom I personally vouch for. Without the other, the concept of responsibility cannot even be deployed. "The other" that can be the media itself. Our choices are even more heavily affected by technological progress, which drives our actions, sometimes arbitrarily, based more on an algorithmic ethics than on ethical responsibility. "Conscious responsibility" is required even for what technology can or cannot entail, which cannot deprive the very notion of responsibility of its meaning to create false beliefs if not downright ambiguities.

Jonas further writes: "Prometheus, unleashed definitively, to whom science gives unprecedented strengths and economy an untiring impetus, calls for ethics that through voluntary restraints will restrain its power to harm humanity." (Jonas 2002, XVII) In a time of the pandemic, this dimension is essential, since whatever could be converted into a digital form through the internet has also received this transformation. Here, then, the semantic image of responsibility cannot but be completed by the Anglo-Saxon concept of *accountability*, meaning institutions having to account for their choices and actions, vouching for the role of the media and the messages they send. A "responsibility" that is enhanced by the duty (not just the moral duty, but the legal one as well) to be transparent, that is, to let citizens know what public agents do, throughout the process. In this case, *accountability* means the accountability of the establishment. Coming from the English verb *to account*, and the noun *ability* in the meaning of "being able to" or "being fit to," it suggests "one's responsibility," i.e., the responsibility for one's actions, a sort of a moral duty to explain and justify one's conduct in the context that demands clearness (Raffoul 2010, 5, 242 ff.).

The responsible attitude, in the aforementioned senses, boosts the strengthening of a sense of community and recalls the need for increasing trust among agents, not just among citizens, on the horizontal level, but also among the institutions, the citizens, and the experts (not least also in connection with the role of the media).

The reasons that are reawakening the individuals' new interest in the *communitas* can be found in the etymology of the word itself, which means something that is not personal, something that belongs to many. The word derives from the Latin preposition *cum*, carrying a social character, and the noun *munus*, which also recalls the concept of duty, a gift that implies mutuality, a constant sharing that requires to be reciprocated. Inspired by Benveniste (Benveniste 1966), Fabris actually writes: "those 'gifts' belonging to the same community are exchanged with confidence to consolidate their relationships. And among these gifts the word, or more generally the communicative act, is what most effectively achieves this purpose." (Fabris 2018, 10)

Such a gift is, in a nutshell, a sort of duty one takes towards someone else, which demands to be released. And, while pre-pandemic atomistic individualism aimed at releasing itself of the duty of the *donum*, a new need for such obligation is reawakening nowadays. For an "operative community" to be "with" again (Nancy 1983), since every human being calls another one or several others (Blanchot 1983, 35), but especially for a society of individuals, who are interconnected by often invisible links. Elias writes:

> And in this way each individual person is really bound: he is bound by living in permanent functional dependence on other people. He is a link in the chains binding other people, just as all the others—directly or indirectly—are links in the chains which bind him. […] and it is this network of the functions that people have for each other, it and nothing else, that we call "society." It represents a special kind of sphere. Its structures are what we call "social structures." (Elias 2001, 16)

On this journey to the rediscovery of the role of the community, the new media play a key role. As we start to lose confidence in the institutions and in the experts, we start to trust the often unknown subjects, which are "visible" on the internet, but are "equal" in "horizontally"-structured spaces. This can lead one to disregard the emergency rules issued by institutions and comply with others, alternative and scientifically uncorroborated, but suggested online.

Trusting or mistrusting becomes a litmus test for a consciously responsible community, a community, in other words, in which "one believes." The neo-

Latin root word fid, which we find in the Latin *fides*, "faith," and in the Greek *peith*, in *peitho*, "joining," actually means "believing" as well as "persuading." They both derive from the Indo-European roots *bandh* and *bheidh* and hint at social ties (De Vaan 2008, 218–209; Rendich 2014, 271). If one establishes a trusting relationship, then one makes a commitment and is led to believe in what is communicated within such relationship of trust. And, as pointed out by Benveniste, believing, from the Indo-European root **kred*, hints at a magical force that we attribute to someone or something we have confidence in. However, as we mentioned, both the Latin *fido* and the Greek *peitho* also nod to the concept of persuasion, in its active and passive form "being persuaded" (*peithomai*). When one arouses a given feeling, one leads the other party to trust, and trust needs to be given and/or not given to move forward, and make a choice or action (Benveniste 1976, 131; Natoli 2016). Faith makes one open up to the other, so that, as Fabris writes:

> In trusting others, we are willing not to consider ourselves as the only guarantors of the legitimacy of some notion or the effectiveness of some action. This happens because we admit—more or less consciously—that we have limits, that we do not know everything, that we do not control everything. My turning to someone else means that I cannot get something without the other's help. So, I must trust others, I must rely on them, I must ask for their support. But first and foremost I must confide in the fact that this support will come and will actually take place in the way I expect it to: even if that's not a foregone conclusion. (Fabris 2020, 124)

Actually, the level of trust involved affects a person's choices and actions, in a conscious cooperation for the common good.

If we, instead, turn to the English word "trust" and the German "Vertrauen"—as a certain addition to the first meaning—, they allude to the dimension of a sound truth (Kroonen 2013, 522–523) that enables us to rely on others, that gives guidance to our actions, without having to surrender ourselves.

Therefore, within a community, trusting becomes the determinant if we do it consciously and responsibly, driven by the need to be mutually

connected. It is a responsibility that citizens have towards themselves and the community, the experts towards the community, which they communicate to, and the institutions that lead it. And, last, but not least, the media, in the communication strategies they deliver to their interlocutors.

Today, the connection between responsibility and trust within a community, which, after the COVID-19 crisis, will hopefully be more cohesive, can happen, especially through solidarity—in the more common sense of sharing as well as in the etymological, more far-reaching sense that we attempt to describe bellow (Neri 2020).

4. Solidarity for a new bond of trust

Then, trust and solidarity are essential resources for civic action that, in the context of a global emergency, aims to protect people as individuals, but above all as a community. And, in such a context, the communicative dimension provides the tools as well as the space, in which such cohesion among individuals, committed to cooperating for the reduction of infection at the level of public health and for the reduction of ambiguous, if not downright false, information at the level of the media, can happen.

Having briefly defined the concept of trust as "fides vinculum societatis" (Locke 1954, 202), Cunico regarding solidarity states:

> […] it is about the (natural and moral) fact that all members of society take care (or will take care) of the needs and interests of all the others. This is partly a constitutive fact, without which (as a partly factual, partly ideal assumption) society would not even exist and would not function, not even minimally. It is partly an unconscious (at least in some respects), involuntary or unintentional, spontaneous exchange, which allows social interdependence to set in and work, as an unsought consequence of individual behaviour, intended to pursue its purposes even through others, as partners in a family relationship (looking after one's spouse, children, parents) or as instruments (cooperation or use of labour, trade or sale […]). (Cunico 2017, 189–190)

Solidarity can, therefore, be viewed as an ethical-social duty, a guiding principle for individual action for the benefit of the community. But joint responsibility, too, is required, for solidarity to be morally understood as taking care of others, where the perspective of charity is replaced by proactive, factual action, a sort of duty, as suggested by its French etymology. Coming from the French *solidarité*, derived, in turn, from the Latin adjective *solidarius*, meaning "joint debtors," it first and foremost means a duty to pay the whole debt (after all, the Latin word *solidus* meant "tough" as well as "undivided," and it is from this adjective that the Italian noun, "soldo," and also "soldier," comes from).

The connotation of a mutuality of obligation—featuring largely in the *Encyclopédie* with the word *solidarité* and with *rapport de solidité*—, of the joint indebtedness of all community members, seems to be historically attributable first to the legal dimension, then to the ethical one, in which everyone is responsible for a moral debt to someone else. Since the time of *De l'Humanité* (1840) by Pierre Leroux, inspired by Maistre, the noun has taken on an even more definitely moral connotation, associated with the sense of joint belonging to a large or small community, of sharing, of active participation. A mutual cooperation, redolent of the revolutionary concept of fraternity (Blais 2012, 3; Cunico 2017, 183 ff.). Here, then, a relationship of solidarity is meant as a relationship of mutual support in a large or small community, with common interests and goals: "each one is responsible for all the others, is burdened with a debt towards the community, but is also relieved from it by the symmetry of the relation of mutual duty and dependency" (Cunico 2017, 191).

Such solidarity can only take place if distances are reduced, from the bottom up, through the citizens' cooperation, and/or from the top down, without detracting from the importance of individual choice. Everyone contributes as much as they can, and receives as much as they need. While solidarity is easier to apply to small communities, where people live close to each other, "closeness" may happen on the internet, regardless of physical closeness one has learnt to do without in the current emergency. Solidarity among citizens, as well as between the state and the citizens, strengthens trust, which is the value and the tool required to fight indifference, conflict, and all sorts of imbalances—social, economic, cultural (Cunico 2017, 181–198; Blais 2012, 153–156). A necessary, reasonable utopia, as Rodotà writes, which could provide an antidote to some

realities and legitimate some behaviors. Participation in the construction of solidarity as active citizens is required in the context, in which citizens and institutions discharge their civic and social duties (Rodotà 2016, 235–236).

But solidarity occurs only if the community is ready to accept it, if others are trusted, and if there is a deeply-rooted culture of participation that can protect it from a general situation, which might fail to feed it. The crisis revealed this with civic participation mixing with volunteering to make up for the restraints imposed by COVID-19.

Solidarity is built on active behaviors and "thus shows an inclusive aptitude, not only towards people but towards all the tools that, in different times and contexts, make it possible" (Rodotà 2016, 239). After all, perceived as mutual support, solidarity is one of the three pivotal principles that underpin moral normative value, which is typical of communicative action, as in Apel's *Kommunikationsethik*, and which is, together with joint responsibility, to be regarded as a mutually-supportive effort to promote mutual agreement (Apel 1992, 30 and 41; Fabris 2014, 61–62).

Therefore, if everyone—the individuals (citizens and experts), the institutions, and the media—commits themselves to behave in a jointly responsible way in the solidarity-imbued context, that trust among all the parties, which is a prerequisite to strengthen the virtuous circle based on active, shared participation for the benefit of the common good, will be reinstated. Science and experts cannot guarantee security that people, further weakened by unexpected events, are asking for. Now is not the time for an atomistic individualism for its own sake *à la* Taylor. People must share in the good social functioning, starting with correct information based on "first reality" à la Luhmann. Otherwise, this would pave the way to the ethics of algorithms and the mechanisms of polarization, to theme clusters between those who believe in the pandemic reality and those who think it is a mere media construction, to *echo chambers*, to inaccurate, if not false information, even to downright *misinformation*, caused by the increasing unreliability of information available online, although without the intention of making it go viral (Quattrociocchi and Vicini 2016; Grignolio 2017, 80; Del Vicario *et al.* 2016, 554–559; Laidlaw 2015, Pariser 2011).

5. Conclusion. The role of media language

In the last few months, convergent, trans-media communication across multiple media, focused on the pandemic in the myriad of its facets, has been the leitmotif of everyone's daily life. Websites, social platforms, TV programs, newspapers have turned the spotlight on interviews with experts, institutional leaders, media professionals, and ordinary citizens in the attempt to convey the most timely, clear, and correct information ever, and to establish a dialogue based on mutual trust with all the parties involved. But, at the same time, an attempt was made to stir everyone's sense of responsibility, not only to encourage everyone to do their bit in the efforts to diminish the aggressiveness of the virus, but also to curb the spreading of unreliable, ambiguous, if not deliberately false information, which may lead us to behave in ways that are wrong for ourselves and for others. Misinformation, as we saw, can induce misbehaviors, it can create a second reality that is disconnected from, if not opposite to, the first one. The increasing virality of infection seems to have also sparked off a mechanism of information virality, which people, both expert and nonexpert, must be able to cope with (Sfardini 2020, 63–74).

Such joint efforts have led the media to reframe their schedules, at times with scaremongering—to remind people of the seriousness of the moment and warn them not to lower their guard—, other times with skeptical or garbling overtones, and then again for merely informational, awareness-raising purposes and/or for calling to mutual support reflecting the view of a community that is not only local, but increasingly global.

Therefore, the aim of focusing attention on some of the keywords of ethics, by choosing to incorporate them in the media lexicon, meant working on achieving a real awareness regardig what is happening, partly by promoting that much sought-after civic solidarity, partly by using the web in public and private procedures, in the attempt to relieve the burden of the loss of several degrees of freedom, which people were forced to give up (Urbinati and Ignazi 2020).

In the area of information, mass communication, as well as trade—and, of course, we mean the many advertisements for food and toiletries—, the lexicon carried by the media played a key role to embellish words with

moral overtones and retrieve their etymological origins. It is here, then, in the institutional leaders' speeches, in advertisements, in the internet, and on the social media—through strategies that relied on empathy, emotion, and reassurance—that such words as mutuality, sharing, belonging, awareness, joining forces, we, responsibility, trust, solidarity, community, and community of individuals—as the Italian Prime Minister pointed out in commemorating Norbert Elias—could be heard.

Of the many systematized concepts, responsible solidarity (in its etymological sense) could maybe be considered as a foremost tool to establish and strengthen the bond of trust among all players, as well as between those players and the media. If trust is lost, that minimal sense of balance for a possible "restart" vanishes. In such a scenario, the communicative dimension seems to be the tool as well as the space, in which such relationship among all players, sharing the same desire for a social, civic, and ethical fabric, committed to cooperating together, may be established (Quadrio Curzio and Marseguerra 2009, 19–39).

And, in this case, the individualism of the contemporary subject, bound to authenticity, can also produce a greater level of responsibility and self-responsibility. If every individual would act by accounting for themselves in the face of others, transparently, for the sake of the general wellbeing, then they would leave behind the pursuit of profit just for themselves, for the sake of a *homo civicus* who can retain independence, but in an ethical manner. Therefore, not by reducing the freedom of the individual, but by increasing it, virtuous relations can be formed, and the existing ones can be strengthened, in the ever-increasing public arena, as also the pandemic has revealed (Beck 2000, 40).

Such bonds will virtuously fight societal vulnerability precisely because of ethical principles, especially joint solidarity, built on the new bond of trust between agents. In other words, becoming experts in communicating and acting ethically, seems to be particularly appropriate, in order to avoid the risk of creating another form of disease based on miscommunication, which would become its aetiology, means, and end (De Kerckhove and Rossignaud 2020). And the choice of language, the most straightforward expression of human behavior, becomes the determinant. Since the expressivist breakthrough, then,

the meaning of what is can be conceived as assumedly dependent on language, on the way man acts or is acted upon by language (as well as culture, tradition, community) (Taylor 2016, 17). Consequently, the words of ethics become fundamental for communication in the state of emergency, for the action that takes charge of oneself and others.

Morin writes:

> […] the unexpected surprises us. Because we are too safely ensconced in our theories and ideas, and they are not structured to receive novelty. But novelty constantly arises. There is no way we can predict it exactly as it will occur, but we should always expect it, expect the unexpected […]. And once the unexpected has happened, we must be able to revise our theories and ideas instead of pushing and shoving the new fact in an attempt to stuff it into a theory that really can't accommodate it. (Morin 2001, 26)

And the language of ethics—predominantly some of the keywords of communication ethics—, conveyed through multiple forms of the media, cannot but be helpful in accepting and coping with the unexpected and acting upon it.

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