

Digital social networks and influencers: the crucible of the decay of ethical-legal values

Joseph TEGUEZEM¹, Derrick ASSONSANG SONFACK²

¹(Department of Philosophy, Psychology, Sociology, Professor-University of Dschang, Cameroon)

²(Department of philosophy, Psychology, Sociology, Doctorate Student-University of Dschang, Cameroon)

ABSTRACT: The advent of digital social networks has considerably contributed to the emergence of new social actors: “influencers”. The latter develop and fuel, in fact, a virtual sociability, which considerably ruins the classic ethico-legal values, which govern and regulate human relations with respect to the dignity and fundamental rights of a human being. However, from the moment when this digitized and planetary form of communication of consciences imposes itself on contemporary societies as one of the benefits of globalized technoscientific sophistication, it seems imperative to support its integration with an ethical and pedagogy. A jurisdiction that is proportionate, cautious and capable of effectively countering the slippages of the actors concerned.

KEYWORDS: Communication consciences, Digital social networks, *Ethical-legal pedagogy, Influencers, Virtual sociability,*

I. INTRODUCTION

Digital social networks are lines or channels of communication that operate over the Internet. They allow a group of interconnected people to exchange or disseminate various information, on the private, social and professional lives of subscribers and non-subscribers, or quite simply on a subject of public order under debate. Operationally, digital platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, WhatsApp, Telegram, Telephone, etc., facilitate the sharing of information, sometimes accompanied by photos and/or videos. These platforms contribute to the creation of blogs, forums and information sites whose authors come from all age groups and all socio-professional categories. Among these authors whose freedom of thought with great media support is unlimited, some have proclaimed themselves “influencers”, because they believe that they have the intelligence and scientific expertise necessary to impact or guide the behavior and choices of their audience. Basically, it is a well thought out and planned digital business that boosts the reputation of actors and substantially increases the volume of their wallets. However, when the search for notoriety and money becomes an obsession for an influencer, the risk is great that this function becomes the crucible of the decay of ethico-legal values within the society, which shelters it. The sophistry that accompanies so-called influential speeches is often concocted on the fringes of any moral and legal regulations, which nevertheless serve as a compass for social action, and the pursuit of ideals defined by the competent political authority. How then can we regulate, on both a moral and legal level, the activities of our influencers, both nationally and internationally, so that these new professions with prebend overtones do not become the death of human dignity and the axiological pillar of human societies? In other words, on what ethical-legal regulations should we base the regulation of the activities of influencers who have almost taken the animation of digital social networks hostage, to avoid the collapse of respect for man and the pylon on which are the social values of a communication of integrity, patriotic, human and progressive?

II. THE REASON FOR DIGITAL SOCIAL NETWORKS IN THE AGE OF GLOBALIZATION

For the benefit of secular globalization, traditional communication networks have been enriched with new digital lines, to improve the capacity of people and societies to exchange or quickly disseminate information on a planetary scale. Anything that allows the Internet user to exercise the talent of his freedom as freely as possible, since he does not necessarily need to submit to a pre-established communication code, except the requirement of his own will, to animate “our common agora, our new public sphere welcoming both private and public discourse” Milad Doueihi, (2011: 103).

Accessibility of communication and the ability of any user to speak implies both the decentralization and democratization of communication and its tools. Anything that contributes to the deconstruction of the large-scale

communication monopoly, which was until then, the exclusive heritage of certain political leaders or a certain category of well-off people. The new mode of digitalized communication, which is already well anchored in social networks, is therefore considerable as the overthrow of communicational hegemonies established in space and time. "Digital walkers" can now sing in unison the anthem of liberated communication.

Under the aegis of globalization and digital technology, the contemporary world has become the theater of unparalleled communication. Scientists, technocrats, computer scientists and politicians will have understood that it is annoying to live in under-communication or in the confiscation of the latter by a privileged few. The teleology of such communicative openness is to give man the capacity to break the chains which stifle his opinions and to make them known and appreciated by the general public who need them to be informed, to cross-reference existential experiences and transgressing the islands of communication that have become very prevalent in the world. The combined effects of the telephone and the Internet have made communication possible throughout the world in all its written, auditory and visual versions; to quickly acquire knowledge and various consumer goods. The power of the communicator now lies in the sophistication of the digital devices that accompany it.

Because he/she benefits from a reduction in the distance between his/her listeners and himself/herself, the player in digital social networks can easily participate, for example, in seminars, symposia, conferences and doctoral defenses which take place in a geographical area very far from his/hers. Digital communication has become the new paradigm for exchanges between people and societies. Under the impetus of impressive digital social networks, influencers, without distinction of gender and notwithstanding the ethical and legal slippages which await them and expose them to multiple accusations and sanctions, display their communication notoriety and sell their expertise in areas that they claim to be in control. Like the philosopher Protagoras' "man, the measure of all things", the influencer has become not only the measure of all communications, but also the standard of all advice, even if the content of his speeches often lends itself to violent criticism.

Beyond the public or private information that this particular category of current 21st century communicator disseminates regularly and graciously on social networks, it ensures the prebends of its activity by signing enormous consulting or advertising contracts with interested partners who are, for example, States or companies of all stripes who request its services for greater visibility, efficiency and reputation. As such, the influencer is generally perceived as the holder of knowledge and expertise that everyone needs to praise either a personal or professional life paradigm, or a specific political-cultural ideology.

According to Solange Ghernaouti-Hétié and Arnaud Dufour (2012: 73), the ingenuity of influencers is proven because they "design the ideas and content of advertising campaigns" which companies sincerely express the need for. In fields such as fashion, beauty, music and tourism, they are considered true locomotives of consumers and economic and cultural progress. These influencers who we call either "digital man[s]" Nicholas Negroponte (1995) or "digital walker[s]" Milad Doueïhi (2011: 87), or "little thumbnail [s]" Michel Serres (2014: 321), have, according to those who request them, a very impactful force of persuasion whose repercussions are unfathomable and influence desires of the consumer. The speeches and advertising they make on digital platforms impact the psychology of those who follow them without restraint, of their potential customers and force the latter to change their behavior or to order their actions and their desires to theirs.

In short, the reason for being digital social networks is very appreciable, because on the communication level, they not only promote the democratization of communication, but also promote the extension of exchanges on a planetary scale, thus responding to the deconstruction of borders between States enshrined in the globalization agenda. In addition, the multiple services that these networks allow influencers to provide to men in particular and to businesses in general are undeniable. Where the problem lies is that many of these networks have become cemeteries where certain influencers bury ethical values without qualms, in the name of hatred, verbal violence, money and legal frameworks, which nevertheless guarantee both respect for human dignity and the unitary core of society. Hence the relevance of these words from Aziza Bennani (2004: 23): "the world today has favored development in its more material dimension, often sacrificing many values to the altar of the god of material progress moral and spiritual. The world is becoming demoralized and de-spiritualized, one might add, under the leadership of a dizzying and unlimited materialization of a caricatured communicational action specific to certain influencers.

III. SOCIAL NETWORKS UNDER THE AEGIS OF INFLUENCERS OR THE BASIS OF THE DECREPITUDE OF ETHICAL AND LEGAL VALUES

The advent of social networks, with a very sophisticated appearance on the national and international communication scene, has given voice to a new generation of communicators called influencers whose activities, beyond the added value they can bring in the field of information, constitute veritable cemeteries of ethico-legal values. In the roles played by influencers, there is a presumption of skills and superiority that the influenced grant them, which therefore gives them confidence and gives them the impression that they will finally find the solution to the various problems that bother them. Hence, the alienation of their freedom and the incapacity they find themselves to think for themselves or to make autonomous choices. They now live and think according to a digital guide whose competence and superiority are assumed and considered as vectors of relief and progress. This

communicative alienation is all the more possible because instead of talking about themselves, the influencers self-flagellate and prefers to pay the influencer to do it for them. Some will undoubtedly agree with this influenced person, mechanically referring to the words of Jean-Paul Sartre (1990: 266) according to which “Others are the essential mediator between me and myself”. However, this is to forget that this assertion by the French philosopher is relative, to the extent that, in a social context where my relationships with others are conflictual, the latter becomes for me a formidable executioner whose speeches and actions cannot in any case be favorable to my person, my existence and my development. It simply becomes for me a Gehenna, that is to say a hell in the sense in which the same Sartre affirms, not without relevance that “hell is other people” Jean Paul Sartre (1947: 167).

Suffice to say that the roles of our influencers are ambivalent, because they are at the crossroads of good and evil, and only opt for good or evil, based on the materialist and pushy arithmetic that makes money the principle and purpose of human action, whatever the moral quality of the means implemented. In a world where economic policy functions as a soulless materiality, influencers are for the most part careerists who make money an absolute value in the name of which they can shamelessly sacrifice all the "secondary" values that try to dissuade them otherwise. Many influencers are lacking, one could say, the moral conscience of which Jean-Jacques Rousseau rightly invoked in these terms: “Divine instinct, immortal and celestial voice; assured guide of an ignorant and limited, but intelligent and free being; infallible judge of good and evil who makes man like God, [and makes] the excellence of his nature and the morality of his actions” Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1958: 196).

Even beyond the lack of moral conscience that they demonstrate, these influencers ignore the sacrosanct principle of respect for others which characterizes the “ethics of communication” in the “public space” theorized by Jürgen Habermas. These derogatory failings are perceptible in the content of certain publications which offend the respectability of human dignity, fundamental human rights and good morals in a public space which is, however considered by Habermas as an open *agora* to the great masters of speech such as university teachers, journalists and many other sworn intellectuals who come to encounter, in respect of dialogic ethics, the word on the major and sensitive problems of society. The introduction of influencers into this high place, once reserved for the cream of human intelligence, has considerably popularized and desecrated it, to the exact extent that access has lost its qualitative filter and any pseudo-intellectual in took the opportunity to enter and speak freely. Everything that Umberto Eco denounced, only to regret it, during an interview with him by the daily *Il Messaggero* (2015): “Social networks,” he rightly asserted, “have given the right to speak to legions of imbeciles who previously only spoke at bars and caused no harm to the community. They were silenced immediately. Today, they have the same right to speak as a Nobel Prize winner.”

In public spaces described as social networks, health and moral unsanitariness, respect and violation of legal rules now coexist. The paradox is that unsanitary conditions dominate healthiness and that violations subjugate respect, as if society were in an anomic situation, due to the lack of the existence of commonly shared ethical and legal standards that allow public authorities to regulate influencer activity. What is certain is that every self-respecting society has a minimum of standards. The real problem lies in the effective observance of these standards by social actors, even influencers. Non-submission to these rules forces our influencers to use any unorthodox means or discourse to earn money, which they consider an end in itself, in the Kantian sense of this expression.

However, this is a paradox that is not small: the depravity of morals, the promotion of easy money and the sale of the dream to a sheep audience devoid of prudential wisdom pompously constitute the editorial of their ambush. Among the victims who naively adore them in their comments, there are thousands of young people and adults whose mental misery is proven and demand, on the part of the competent political authorities, the taking of measures proportionate to the seriousness of the illness under which they are suffering, bend unconsciously. Influencers are cunning enough to seduce and direct their customers, according to a well-known expression by Milad Doueïhi (2011: 32) towards the “virtual urbanism” that they occupy. Their lethal weapon consists of the dissemination of photos and videos of a pornographic nature, since they are driven by “the desire to make secret parts of oneself public in order to make them known and validated” (Anne Dalsuet, 2013: 75). As a result, these photos and videos capture the attention of subscribers who gradually become slaves to them, failing to transform into passionate consumers of sex, or even licensed sellers of the latter under the metaphorical label of “chili pepper”. “Technology has become porn”, we should recall, to prove the author of this certainly laconic, but very relevant assertion right: Gilles Lipovetsky (1983: 241).

According to Anne Berthus (2010: 89) in fact, pornographic “seduction” constitutes one of the surest baits for recruiting followers whose reactions help influencers earn more money from their known and unknown sponsors. This pornographic seduction is generally accompanied by the exposure of the lifestyle, the expensive and attractive travel stories of the influencers who want, thereby, to insinuate that the sale of “chili pepper” is very advantageous and guarantees the happiness of those or those who indulge in it. However, sometimes these are simply cleverly crafted fairy tales, to bewitch the gullible and ruthlessly capture them in mystical and diabolical networks, which seriously infest our post-modern societies.

From this perspective, we believe that social networks, under the aegis of influencers, are not only the basis of the decrepitude of ethical and legal values, but also the labyrinth where these values struggle to find their meaning, even with regard to pluralism ethical and legal which dominates the post-modern social space. The all-out constitution of islands of values and ethical or legal standards, which collide in the world, is likely to suggest that human societies have let go of their guard on respect for the ethical and legal protocol, which must regulate activities, the choice of norms and values to be celebrated today. The proliferation of esoteric circles, in which many influencers are integrated, is not innocent in the face of the dizzying rise of unnatural values and norms, which are igniting our current societies. Hence the need to redouble vigilance by strengthening the ethical-legal regulations in this area, to ensure rigorous compliance with these regulations, so that respect for man and the pylon on which the social values of the company rest are preserved. A communication of integrity, patriotic, humane and progressive.

IV. ETHICAL-LEGAL REGULATION AND REGULATION OF THE ACTIVITIES OF INFLUENCERS ON SOCIAL NETWORKS

Regulating the activities of influencers on social networks means ensuring their proper functioning based on rigorous regulations which define, upstream, a set of rules or ethical-legal prescriptions which accompany them. It ultimately means setting up an ethical-legal pedagogy for the use of social networks. There is no doubt that the pluralism of cultures and the prevalence of multiform values which structure post-modern societies make it impossible for States to reach perfect agreement on the choice of regulations which should underpin such pedagogy and therefore facilitate regulation or monitoring the functioning of influencers.

In a serious society, the implementation of a communication policy that aims to be honest, patriotic, humane and progressive remains worrying. Because it is such a policy, which allows the State to safeguard respect for human dignity and the ethical and legal values, which underlie the common ideals, pursued. These values themselves are only known, and only effectively take shape, when they are explicitly recorded in an ethical-legal code duly drawn up by the country concerned. This supposes, in our humble opinion, that there is not a watertight opposition between moral laws and legal laws within a society; since the humanization of positive law involves the exploitation of moral principles and that, the protection of these principles requires the intervention of positive law.

In this normative perspective on both an ethical and legal level, it should be remembered that at the international level, efforts are constantly being made. We think, for example, of the Budapest Convention (2001) on cybercrime in all its structural variations. We can also cite the African Union (AU) Convention (2014) on cyber security and the protection of personal data, which places emphasis on the protection of personal data and the fight against cybercrime in all its common forms.

At the national level, and specifically in Cameroon, there are legal texts such as Law No. 2010/012 of December 21, 2010 relating to cyber security and cybercrime, which regulates cyber activities and punishes moral slippage harmful observable in cyberspace. The case of Cameroon is, however, not a continental or global exception: each country, which monitors the quality of its communication, has a minimum of institutional framework created for this purpose; beyond the signed agreements, including the implementation and monitoring are the responsibility of international institutions. However, whether on the international or national level, the choice of regulation and regulation faces serious problems.

Each people has in fact a specific culture which expresses its deep truth beyond what it is through the conventions which it can sign with other peoples. As such, this culture is based on a set of cultural values different from those of others; it coincides with what is profound and autonomous in each people. This autonomy allows it to choose values and ideals to pursue which do not always correspond to those of other countries, which also enjoy cultural independence. This is the reason why ways of thinking and acting vary from one people to another. This variation is all the more relevant as the regulations and aspirations of each country are more or less different from those of others. In the meantime, it becomes difficult to fully agree on the different laws to be integrated into regulations of an international nature, which will make it possible to regulate the activities of influencers, without calling into question the specific cultural traits of each member country.

Clearly, the conventions are never the expression of a “We” which expresses the perfect agreement of the signatory countries. Most often, the unity of the agreements is only a caricature of the unity of the dictatorship of the wills of the strongest who occupy strategic and preponderant functions within the conventional chain. Consequently, members who are in the minority because they do not have real political or financial strength to energetically contradict the decisions of the most powerful, have difficulty implementing the decisions and laws to the letter, and locally voted upon when signing the agreement, because their mechanical implementation would contradict some parts of their own regulations and culture.

In the same order of difficulties, the regulation of influencer activities varies from one country to another. Because not all countries have the technical, technological, IT and satellite means necessary to identify and track influencers in their different urban spaces. The phenomenon of pseudonyms and false identities, which characterizes the profiles displayed on social networks, is perceptible among many influencers, and requires a lot

of investment to decode their true identity. Thus, monitoring their operation, so as to bring their activities into line with the regulations in force, is a problematic challenge. This is also one of the reasons why the mode of regulating the activities of influencers tends to be reduced, in poor countries, to the implementation of an ethical-legal pedagogy relating to the use of social networks. But if this pedagogy is theoretically strong, the fact remains that its practical application is mediocre, judging by the insubordination of certain influencers and their laudators, who have become by the force of New Information and Communication Technologies and the celebrity of the “technological bluff” Jacques Ellul (1988), full citizens of social networks.

The ethical-legal pedagogy relating to the use of social networks that we are considering will consist of making users of said networks aware of the dangers to which they are exposed *via* conferences, symposia or school and university programs which update the virtues and the importance of ethics and civic behavior. Let us remember that since the Greek philosophers like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, ethics has played a determining role in the conduct of personal and collective affairs. It is this, which allows the individual, as well as human societies, to register their actions and the choice of their different values in the register of good morals. Ethics remains, in collaboration with positive law, we believe, the compass of human action. Without it, the unitary and axiological core of society would be constantly deconstructed. Thus, it is by distinguishing right from wrong, what is permitted from what is forbidden, that we can transform social networks into a place favorable to healthy communication and good information. Ethical-legal pedagogy must therefore be strong and impactful enough to achieve its objectives; it must considerably equip influencers and Internet users with the legal laws and ethical virtues, which systematically protect them from the slippages, which are quite legion in our societies. At a time when the Machiavellian exploitation of social networks is very worrying both nationally and internationally, ethical and legal education must be imposed at all levels where moral and legal injuries are identified.

We must say, in fact, that the chaotic situation towards which certain users of social networks are directing humanity is not inevitable: it is quite simply desired and maintained by moral delinquents who replace the love of men with love of money. When Thomas Hobbes said that “man is a wolf to man”, he did not think he was saying it so well, because man's greatest enemy is still man himself who decides freely to violate one's moral conscience, which very opportunely reminds us of this precious advice from Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1966: 366): “Man, no longer look for the author of evil: this author is yourself. There is no other evil than that which you do or that which you suffer, both come from you.”

In this dual Hobbesian and Rousseauist perspective, we believe that there are reasons to hope, to escape from evil, to morally and legally clean up the activities of our influencers in particular, and the use of social networks by all citizens in general. Ethical-legal pedagogy should be able to make influencers and *followers* aware of their wrongdoing, to become true heralds of good information, respect for dignity and human rights in social networks. Good communication is always potentially the basis for a more peaceful living together that promises a bright future for all. Consequently, the State, in its capacity as the supreme authority in a society, must be strong enough to support the application and respect by all of the indicated pedagogy. Because impunity constitutes a real stumbling block to its success. It is this impunity, which justifies in many cases, the ostentatious perpetuation of immoral acts or illicit practices on social networks. There is no honor or respect for a State that is lax and indifferent to such acts: “there is no point, in fact,” Aristotle rightly affirmed, “to have the best laws, even if ratified by the entire body of citizens, if the latter are not subject to habits and education entering into the spirit of the constitution” Aristotle (1970: 203-204).

We cannot do without the great philosophers like Aristotle for whom the exercise of all human activities and the production of all the arts presuppose prior education and habits. It is therefore an ethical-legal pedagogy carefully measured in its content which will be able, we believe, to theoretically supervise the activity of “influential networkers” and prescribe the red lines that they should not cross, many of the latter being themselves recruited from the trash of knowledge, real centers of incivism and communicational vandalism. However, the good influencer is not ignorant or vandal. He is an intelligent, cultured man who respects ethics and social rules and communication ethics. He is a good man who honestly earns his daily bread. He is a man who constantly puts into practice the requirements of an ethical-legal pedagogy relating to the use of social networks, and works rationally on the minds of his interlocutors to purify it and introduce the right information. Nothing is stronger than good information, which promotes the progress of man and society. Only the possession of the right information can guide man on the royal road to happiness. If social networks have become nowadays the cemeteries of moral virtues and respect for positive law, it is because of this bad breed of morally and legally uneducated influencers and enjoyers of material prebends whose ephemeral nature is entirely recognized.

To do this, the pedagogy that we strongly suggest must not be limited to influencers or users of social networks; it must extend to the whole of society and without distinction of age or profession. It must therefore not be one-off or temporary, but permanent within society. It is a global education, which concerns the human being and lasts throughout his life. No matter the different steps she can take, the main thing is to keep her flame burning. Everyone knows that ignorance and incivism are the worst enemies of society. The eradication of the latter is a categorical imperative in a society, which aspires to progress and the stability of state institutions. The emergence

of a new generation of influencers and “digital walkers” must be incubated by a proportionate ethical-legal pedagogy, because their moral and legal conversion will not be done by decree, but by regular ethical and legal education and accompanied by appropriate sanctions, to correct the behavior of outlaws. Since it is, in truth, what the philosopher Hubert Mono Djana calls, not without relevance, a “transformational” ethics (2006: 123).

V. CONCLUSION

The regulation and regulation of the activities of influencers who drive social networks today are based, beyond international conventions whose contents and application do not always meet the cultural and axiological requirements of the countries concerned, on the implementation, at the local level, of an ethical-legal pedagogy which will revolutionize mentalities and convert them into true heralds of civic communication respectful of human dignity and human rights. It is at this price that technically and technologically less well-off countries will be able to regulate and sanction the activities of influencers at their level in order to avoid the collapse of the pylon on which the social values of a communication of integrity, patriotic, human rest. , respectful and progressive. It is also at this price that each country will safeguard its ethical-legal and humanist personality in a world “dominated by the noisy reign of utilitarianism and mercantilism” Jacques Fame Ndonga (2006: 11).

REFERENCES

- [1] Aristotle., (1992). *Nicomachean Ethics*, Trans. Bartholomew. SAINT HILARY. French general bookstore. - (1970). *Politics*, trans. J. Tricot, Paris. Vrin.
- [2] Berthus. A., (2010). *Guide to seduction on the internet*. Paris. Alphée, Jean-Paul Bertrand.
- [3] Bennani. A., (2004). Introduction first part. In Bindé J., (eds.). *Where are the values going? Paris*, UNESCO Editions/ Albin Michel. 23-25.
- [4] Dasuet. A., (2013). *Are you on Facebook? How do social networks change friendship?* Paris. Flammarion.
- [5] Doueih. M., (2011). *For a digital humanism*. Paris. Threshold.
- [6] Ellul. J., (1988). *The technological bluff*. Paris. Hatchet.
- [7] Fame Dongo. J., (2006). Preface. In Obianga -Zoe JS & Ekambi Moutome J., (eds.). *Ethics and Communication in Cameroon*. Yaoundé, Éditions Clé. 9-12.
- [8] Ghernaouti-helie . S, Dufour. A., (2012). *Internet*. Paris. PUF.
- [9] Habermas. H., (1978). *Public space. Archeology of advertising as a constitutive dimension of bourgeois society*. (1962). Trans., Paris. Payot.
- [10] Kant. E., (1971). *Foundation of the metaphysics of morals*, trans. V. Delgos. Paris. Delagrave.
- [11] Lipovetsky. G., (1983). *The era of the void, Essay on contemporary individualism*. Paris. Gallimard.
- [12] Messagero, (2015). “Umberto Eco attacks social networks: 'The Internet has given voice to imbeciles’” Consulted on https://www.ilmessagero.it/societa/persona/umberto_eco_attacca_social_network_imbecilli-1085803.html, 01/12/ 2022.
- [13] Mono Ndjana. H., (2006). *Outline of a transformational ethics*. In Obianga -Zoe JS & Ekambi Moutome J., (eds.). *Ethics and Communication in Cameroon*. Yaoundé, Éditions Clé. 123-138.
- [14] Negroponte. N., (1995). *The Digital Man*. Paris. Robert Laffont.
- [15] Rousseau. J. J., (1958). *Émile or education*. Paris. Ed. Socials, The people's classics.
- [16] Sartre. J P., (1947). *Behind closed doors, scene V, in Theater, t.I, NRF*
- [17] Greenhouses. M., (2014). *Pantopie: from Hermès to Little Thumb*. Paris. The Apple tree.