Communication for life!

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When I was eleven years old, I got a pen friend in South Africa. What an experience it was to be in touch with someone on the other side of the world! So far away. So different. So thrilling. So exciting. The year was 1981, and apartheid held South Africa in an iron grip. Sweden had already begun campaigning against apartheid. The situation was well known. But an eleven year old doesn’t follow news reports and doesn’t see the consequences of the situation affecting her fellow beings on the other side of the world.

My pen friend changed my view of life and the world. Forever. It was thanks to my far-sighted teacher that we were given pen friends in South Africa, partly so as to learn how to write in English, and partly so as to learn more about the state of society. What a teacher, who changed our lives; what far-sightedness! I am unbelievably grateful.

I will never forget the joy I felt getting the yellow, slightly crumpled letters with exotic stamps on the envelopes which landed in our post-box at home every ten or twelve weeks. It took time to receive a letter in those days, although I thought it went quite quickly. We exchanged letters for four years and got to know each other pretty well, sharing happy times and sad times together, the way two teenage girls do.

I realised, somewhat painfully, how different people’s living conditions can be. Kimberly lived in the shadow of apartheid and was not allowed to do what she wanted, and her family were poor, yet they were still able to afford schooling for her. For my part, I lived in well-to-do Sweden in the northern part of Europe, a farm with lots of animals and flowers, loved and cherished by my family. I was free to do what I wanted; I could go out with friends and go to the cinema.

My encounter with Kimberly’s fate changed my view of the world and awakened in me a sense of justice. The word freedom acquired a new meaning for me. Since then, I have tried to work for a more peaceful and just world. Everyone can contribute in their own way. Unfortunately I lost contact with Kimberly and never got to meet her, but the time we had together via our letters has remained with me all these years.

When I joined Facebook some years ago, I thought about Kimberly; I thought, what if I can find her via this channel and resume contact? I have searched but not found her. However, I have the same unusual surname, so there’s still the hope that she will look me up one day via social media. Kimberly, if you read this, do get in touch!

I compare the years I had with my pen friend with my friends on Facebook. Social media can create an increased understanding of one’s fellow beings and other cultures. They are only a click away.

A changed landscape of communication

Over the past twenty years, the landscape of communication and the role of the communications officer have changed radically. The past eight years have seen the evolution of social media. Who could imagine that Facebook, set up in 2004, would be the world’s fifth largest nation in terms of membership? At present there are 300 million users, of whom 100 million log in every day.
This means that social media such as Facebook, microblogs such as Twitter, and film channels such as YouTube and Bambuser offer endless opportunities for becoming published. Each and every one of us can tell a story about life, big or small; can describe forgotten catastrophes; can form opinions in a way never done in history. Established media find that the public has already provided news in words and pictures. This places demands on them, therefore, to work with both traditional channels and new and fast forms of social media.

This is not such a problem in democratic countries where social media exist, but in non-democratic countries social media pose a threat and are controlled by the authorities. There are clear signs and proof of this to some extent in both Russia and China. China has blocked at least 15 or so sites, including the influential Twitter.

**Communication for peace and democracy**

The Arab Spring or Jasmine Revolution is proof that social media and individual initiative can change the world. With the aid of reporting via Twitter and Facebook, the citizens of these countries managed to mobilise themselves so that they succeeded in bringing about change and saw their leaders toppled. The situation still remains unstable, but these citizens continue to share their thoughts and report on events via social media. They get there before the state-controlled channels do, and provide a broader and more credible picture of life where they are. At times they’re the only lifeline to the outside world.

The Swedish government has for some time now provided aid to a project known as TOR (www.tor.eff.org), in order to support the use of social media operating under dictatorships by offering encryption and safe channels – an aid project much debated and disputed. This is intended to give a voice to those who can’t make their voices heard on their own. In conjunction with the Jasmine Revolution of 2011, the number of TOR users increased, among them the well known blogger Lina Ben Mheeni who regularly reported on events via social media.

In the same way, TOR has been used during the revolution in Egypt as an aid in sending out reports and video clips, especially at the time the dictator Hosni Mubarak fell from power. In the lead up to the presidential elections in Egypt, social media constituted one of the primary sources available to the country’s inhabitants for reporting on their lives there. A Tweet from a few days back, “Be careful all of you taking to streets. People shouting at me not to take pics, rumours of thugs on the way” #Tahrir #Egypt.

In Belarus, TOR has also contributed to skills development in terms of how to protect oneself when the Internet is monitored by the regime. In April, the Swedish government organised an international conference called the Stockholm Internet Forum, on the subject of freedom on the Internet. The Swedish Institute in Alexandria in Egypt supports activists for democracy on the Internet. The stance it has taken has been much debated and called into question.

One early example of online activism took place in Sweden. A young immigrant boy in Stockholm was abused and then died as a result, one evening in October 2007. Anton Abele, 15 years old at the time, created a Facebook group called “Save Us from Street Violence”, which very quickly attracted over 100,000 members. On 12 October 2007, Abele organised a gathering to protest against street violence, and over 10,000 young people and adults congregated in Kungsträdgården in Stockholm. Abele is now a substitute member of the Swedish Riksdag, and thus its youngest ever member.
The established media invite the public as well to submit direct reports and have these published on their platforms. A concrete example of this is Aljazeera (www.aljazeera.com), which invited, by way of example, those who were in the Horn of Africa in connection with the famine there to report to them directly via their smartphones. All the contributions are shown on a map, and one can click on the links to find several strong and gripping accounts. In connection with this form of reporting, there is an SMS number one can text to send money to support those in vulnerable situations.

A change in working methods
I think back over the twenty years or more I have spent as a Communications Officer in the Church of Sweden and the big changes that have taken place. Technology has given us new opportunities, but the question is whether we exploit them all? Do we dare as a church to step right into this new arena, or do we still regard this as nothing for the likes of us who prioritise personal encounters? Today, however, the personal encounter takes place partly over the phone, partly online. It is only one’s imagination which sets limits. The coming generations are citizens of the Internet and do not see geographical borders in the same way as those of us in middle age do.

In the autumn of 2009, the Church of Sweden set up a prayer website www.svenskakyrkan.se/be, (also in English). There were many sceptical voices raised among our colleagues: surely one can’t pray on the Internet; it isn’t appropriate, etc. Those in our Church management were more far-sighted and approved of our approach, and during that first week almost 10,000 prayers were submitted. Now, just over two years later, we have received 100,000 prayers from around the world, in 20 or so different languages and from visitors from 98 different countries.

We chose to highlight the inner core of Christian belief: prayer – the conversation of the heart with God – and the Swedish people, who are categorised as being one of the most secularised peoples in the world, visited our prayer website and formulated their prayers. Thousands of prayers a day at the beginning. Media which usually don’t broadcast positive news about the Church chose now to report on us time and again, and I personally have collaborated in 189 interviews on the prayer website both in Sweden and abroad.

The Church, prayer and technology are an exciting combination for the media. I am still moved by the interest shown by the Swedes in investing in prayer. I read with joy those prayers which are searchable. There are prayers for one’s nearest and dearest; prayers which describe social developments in Sweden and the rest of the world, prayers about financial crisis, unemployment, swine flu, worries about starting school, childlessness, illness and death. I think especially of seven-year-old Rasmus who prays for his sick grandfather and prays not to be bullied in school.

From planning to publication in real time
I think back to a media trip I made in southern Africa just over ten years ago and how work practices have changed and placed new demands on Communications Officers. That time we visited the exquisitely beautiful country of Zambia with its flowering jacaranda trees yet also its extreme poverty because the crops had failed two years in a row. The secular media showed no interest.

We, as part of the Church and part of ACT Alliance, travelled there with a team of journalists from various media. We make this kind of trip every year, and journalists can
apply to take part. This time we had five reporters with us, including a TV reporter with a
South African background and a South African photographer. We spent ten days visiting the
exposed villages and the extremely hospitable Zambians who shared the last of what they
had with us.

I think of Samuel who dreamed of becoming a cotton farmer or a football star. I think of
their happiness and belief in the future which they shared with me, despite their extreme
circumstances. I wondered then and still wonder now at their joie de vivre. Our reporting of
the trip was received with great interest, in part in the Nordic countries and in part in southern
Africa, the US and the UK. However, the working method we employed then is one that no
longer works. In those days we wrote up our reports, took photos and then travelled home in
order to edit and publish the results a week or two later.

These days one has to send reports during the trip via the Internet and social media in
order to be credible. Many humanitarian aid organisations and churches choose to equip
their partners with smartphones so they can report directly from their various projects. It is a
fantastic step that allows partners to give their own picture of events. That’s what I call
mutual cooperation on equal terms.

The task of the communications officer
The changed landscape of communication places new demands on those of us who work as
Communications Officers. The struggle for dignity for all children, all men and all women
requires us as Communications Officers to be effective advocates for human rights –
including the right of everyone to communicate – both as defenders of human integrity and
as God’s creations.

WACC’s Christian Principles state that prophetic communication opens up alternative
horizons which are not confined to being viewed from those perspectives determined by the
dominant culture. Prophetic communication gives individuals the right to narrate their own
stories about life using their own images and form of expression. Communications Officers
must ensure that those who have been silenced have access to the media they need in order
to share their views with the rest of the world.

Another perspective is peace work, where Communications Officers can play a leading
role in reporting and describing events and allowing different groups to be given a voice in
order to increase understanding for each other’s differences and similarities. It is absolutely
essential to have a non-violent perspective in the communication, the tone, the imagery one
uses – indeed, one’s entire message should be suffused with the spirit of non-violence in
respect of the private individual. This can help promote an understanding of intercultural and
interreligious perspectives.

Communication for life means taking the perspective of peace and justice and respecting
human rights. We should have space to grow and develop in the spirit of genuine solidarity,
hope and love towards our fellow beings. We are as one.

I borrow a quotation from Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu: “We face a global
challenge. We must now mobilise in order to conquer poverty, inequality and climate change.
It is still a heady feeling that we succeeded in abolishing apartheid in South Africa. Let us
mobilise once more. Together we can do it.”

Tutu goes on to say that the South African concept of ubuntu means that we are as one;
that none of us operates in a vacuum. In this age of globalisation, this mutual dependence is
clearer than ever before. We should dare to stand up for injustice and dare to protest against
it. It is our responsibility and our task as communicators. You can contribute with your gifts, and I with mine – together we are strong. Communication for life is the catchphrase!

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