10th Annual Conference of the International Association of
Cross-Cultural Competence and Management   - Ruse 2011

COMMUNICATION IN THE DIGITAL WORLD AND DIALOGUE AMONG CIVILIZATIONS
/Communication – from John Atanasoff until the present day /

Prof. Minka Zlateva, PhD,
UNESCO Chair "Communication and Public Relations" in the Faculty of
Journalism and Mass Communication of the Sofia University "St. Kliment
Ohridski
e-mail minkazlateva@gmail.com

The rapid development of new information technologies has overturned and continues to overturn, at an unprecedented rate, not only many of the traditional notions for interpersonal communication but also public communication practices at all levels – local, regional and global.

It is not only the dimensions, techniques and technologies of communication that are changing, but its very essence is also being deeply affected. This is so because internet communication provides us with numerous combinations of interpersonal and public communication, and, instead of the traditional mass audience, researchers now discuss electronic societies, i.e. groups of consumers unified by common interests which are, in their nature, complex, dynamic and situational. (Burkart, 2000 :382)

The circle of experts from different scientific spheres who demonstrate a lively interest in communication issues and more specifically in intercultural communication in the light of the so-called "global drift" of humanity, as formulated by Zygmunt Bauman, has expanded significantly. And, as current events on both national and global scale indicate, we are already facing the urgent need for an in-depth interdisciplinary analysis of the versatile aspects of the new phenomenon – social media.

The main cornerstones of my report will be:
1. "Linqua universalis" -   the unfulfilled dream of the "father of the computer" John Atanasoff;

2. The new aspects of communication management in social network communication;
3. The global UN initiative "Alliance of Civilizations" - as a platform for establishment of active dialogue between cultures and civilizations.

Let us first look back at the dawn of the information era so that we can understand the contemporary processes within the global network.

The issues of communication with "the Other", i.e. someone whose identity is different from ours, of cultural flows and their movement, of cultural identity and uniqueness have, for centuries, fascinated scientists who, depending on their respective research field, have adopted different approaches in the study of those issues. But, whereas until recently those issues were the subject of study mainly for philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, philologists, linguists, writers and journalists, nowadays significant interest is displayed by representatives of the exact sciences.

One of them is the prominent American scientist of Bulgarian origin John Vincent Atanasoff, the inventor of the first digital computing device in the world back in 1939-1941. The computer was called ABC /the Atanasoff-Berry computer/ as it was conceived in Iowa State University in Ames together with the graduate student eng. Clifford Berry.

As John Atanasoff himself writes, half of his blood "comes from south of the Balkan" (Atanasoff, 1992:38), which is where his father, Ivan Atanasoff, came from, before settling in America, having survived the Ottoman massacres in the village of Boyadzhik, Yambol district, during the April uprising of 1876 in Bulgaria. It was from his father that the future inventor inherited his determination, the resilient Bulgarian spirit and the sincere love for his homeland and went on the preserve the surname of Atanasoff for future generations (and for history!). The other half of John Vincent's blood is a mix of Irish and French (Atanasoff, ibid) and this is probably where he takes his inherent charm and the tenacity he displays in overcoming of obstacles. What an illustrative example of the enrichment of personality in the process of intercultural communication!

The Bulgarian origin of "the father of the computer" is well known and has instilled us with pride for several decades.

But the computer invented by the scientist was in fact merely the instrument enabling the revolutionary step forward. According to acad. Blagovest Sendov, who was the first to establish contact with John Atanasoff while holding the post of chairman of the Presidium of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, this step consists of the fact that John Atanasoff "abandoned the stable and reliable, albeit very slow mechanics,

and chose flexible and fast electronics" and thus "opened the doors to the contemporary information era for mankind" (Sendov 2003 :17)

Of course, John Atanasoff himself often admitted that at first he had no idea how fast computers were to develop and how rapidly they would penetrate the everyday life of contemporary people. But the issues of communication between people fascinated him for decades.

I was lucky enough to personally discover proof of this interest of his in November 2009, when I was invited to lecture in the Department of Media and Communications and the Department of Computer Sciences in Iowa State University in Ames. I had the unique opportunity to see a model of the famous ABC computer as well as personal belongings of John Atanasoff's, carefully preserved in the Special Collection Department of the Iowa State University. Among them was a handwritten autobiography of the inventor. The final section was unusual, entitled "Other scientific interests". The first place among those interests was held by "Agriculture", and second - "Problems in Communication".

And here is the explanation given by John Atanasoff himself to the question why communication problems hold such fascination for him:

"My interest in this subject is very intense and ranges from the electrical engineering aspects of communication theory, trough the realm of what Dr. Norbert Wiener has called cybernetics, to coding and other semantic aspects bases of human communication. During the war I maintained as a hobby an interest on the numerical effectiveness of human communication. Much has been justly written about the importance of communication to human race. The fact that it is becoming a great "overhead burden" of human existence is not so well known. The case for better human communication is becoming more urgent".

I would like to emphasize the impressive scale and wide scope of John Atanasoff's interests – from the electrical engineering aspects through communication theory to its role for enhanced human existence. Here is a truly gifted, rich personality, a broad-minded, integral individual who single-mindedly and persistently overcomes all obstacles on the path to the next scientific or applied scientific problem, yet never compromising the scope of his experiments and creative pursuits.

An indisputable proof in this direction is the history of ABC, forever bound to an unprecedented case in the history of patent law, known as the "thirty-year patent war". John Atanasoff, invited as an expert by Honeywell established and proved, with iron-clad logic, precision and accuracy, during the Honeywell-Sperry Rand suit regarding the computer patent, that the main ideas underlying the creation of ENIAC by Eckert and Mauchly were

stolen by Eckert from his ABC computer. The judge, Earl R. Larson, found the courage and fortitude to announce, before the Federal Court in Minneapolis, a just decision against the "precedence" of Eckert and Mauchly and their ENIAC, and, on October 19th, 1973, the truth of the merits of John Atanasoff for creating the first computer finally triumphed.

A certain detail from this patent war deserves special attention, as it is directly related to the topic of our conference. In the heat of the Honeywell vs. Sperry Rand suit, the following episode occurs, as remembered by John Atanasoff: "On Monday I found myself alone so I went to the University of Minnesota and discussed some aspects of the origin of writing in China, Japan and Southeast Asia with a professor from China. He was delighted with our meeting and chance to talk with someone outside the field of linguistics, and I was happy to find out that there are still people in the world who are not involved in patents" (Atanasoff,2003:222). Incredible as it may sound, even at such a fateful time, John Atanasoff remains faithful to his own nature and pursuits a problem related to his greatest dream – the creation of a "new alphabet for the future welfare of mankind"! Even under those dramatic circumstances, his personal fate remains in the background because he is much more interested in universal problems!

He talked of this new alphabet on the day when his paternal homeland, Bulgaria, recognized his special merits and scientific contribution and awarded him with the Order of Cyril and Methodius, 1st class. Cyril and Methodius are the creators of the Slavic alphabet, and today the Cyrillic alphabet is the third official alphabet of the European Union, following the Latin and Greek alphabets, for which we, Bulgarians, are justifiably proud. Bulgaria demonstrated its appreciation for the contribution of John Atanasoff twenty full years before the almighty United States of America and President George Bush personally awarded him with the U.S. National Medal of Technology.

John Atanasoff's dream to create a universal alphabet, or "lingua universalis" to unite all people on the planet remained unfulfilled. In a purely philological aspect, he did indeed fail, but pragmatically speaking, he is the original founder of digital computing using binary code, which, in reality, enables computer connection between people in all corners of the world.

Digitalization based on the binary code causes essential changes both in interpersonal and public communication. Thousands of scientists from around the world take up the study of this exciting new issue. At the same time, the development of internet continues with unfamiliar speed, outpacing all forecasts with amazing alacrity.

The newest aspects of the global network are connected with the emergence and development of the blogosphere and social networks. We should, of course, differentiate between bloggers and members of social networks who use the latter mainly for self-expression and self-advertising, and those who interpret them as a wide platform for sharing of socially significant ideas and taking a stand on crucial current issues of the social, economic, political and cultural development of their country, region or mankind as a whole.

"The essential aspect of Internet-based computer-mediated communication is that Internet users have access to the largest multitude of possible communication partners and information sources, and the fact that they communicate within a specific cultural context with common traditions and symbols" (Dermendzhieva, 2001 : 29).

Thus researchers in the field of communication management and intercultural communication are faced with mainly three wide study fields. With regard to access to information sources, the issues of freedom of access and equality of use are of special interest.

The diversity of research aspects in the field of information sources is also wide – issues related to their reliability, the actual and fictitious identity of users, the value of information in encyclopaedias of the wikipedia type (http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog), etc.

With view of the topic of our conference, the greatest interest is posed by the study of the communication process within a specific cultural context with common traditions and symbols.

According to Lyubomir Stoykov, blogs and the bloggosphere created by them can be defined as **subcultural phenomena** because "Subculture is a word denoting freedom of appearance, freedom of creativity, freedom and informality of the selected entertainment model. Subculture is a religious rite in which the only arbitrator of values and faith, taste and preferences is the individual" (Stoykov, 2006:44). This is why, according to the author, the main characteristics of the blogger as a subcultural persona is "his/her non-indifference, his/her disobedience, his/her oppositional attitude" (Stoykov, 2006 : 54).

Perhaps the most recent example in this direction is the role of social networks for the wave of political changes which has awoken the younger generation and has transformed the political background in several Arab countries. On the one hand, internet networks have become, for that generation, the main source of "forbidden information". On the other hand, the activity of bloggers and the expansion of social networks has clearly revealed that ordinary citizens find, within blogs and social networks, the

much desired space for personal participation in the hot political debates of their time by means of expressing a personal opinion before the immense audience of the network, and the opportunity to show that they are ready for specific social action. These events clearly demonstrate the need for exchange of experience and adaptation of social practices in the respective context with view of the political, religious and cultural traditions of each country.

Thirdly, insufficient recognition of the symbols used in the process of communication in different cultures and civilizations on behalf of the remaining part of the world shows the need of "translation" of messages in the global context in order to ensure proper deciphering and support on behalf of the democratic forces on the planet. The path to change requires clear and accurate messages to invoke the desired, and not boomerang effects and to mobilize societies for specific and significant social action.

A similar conclusion can be drawn from one of the most recent events in the Bulgarian political space – the protests against the increase in fuel prices announced by the civil organization "Force" (*Сила*) in the spring of this year. Born from the crest of the wave of general discontent, it nevertheless failed to articulate clear proposals for satisfaction of the demands of thousands of consumers in the country, because it was unable to make adequate use of the social and political context of the situation and to identify the unifying symbols of those affected.

My proposal is that, in the near future, we embark on intercultural studies of those intriguing current issues, by establishing interdisciplinary European teams of experts – members of the Association for Cross-Cultural Competence and Management.

In the course of such studies we must, of course, pay due attention to the huge potential which the global network is able to mobilize within certain time terms for the solution of important current problems of contemporary mankind.

On May 5th of this year, together with several colleagues of mine – lecturers and students in Sofia University, we had the pleasure of attending the lecture of UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon in the ceremonial hall of our Alma Mater. "How the world looks in 2031 will depend largely on the decisions we make in 2011. That is why the United Nations needs your engagement, now... What we expect to happen in 20 years may happen much sooner, but it depends on us," he stressed. (Ban Ki Moon, 2011). The Secretary General urged students to develop, to dream, not to give up and not to conform … As the main challenges, he identified /the creation of/ a

more prosperous world, free of extreme poverty, a cleaner, greener and more sustainable world, and a safer world, free of nuclear threat.

The prerequisites for the realization of those perspectives is educating the young generation in the spirit of tolerance, humanism, good will and intercultural dialogue. Efficient good practices are established through the participation of young people and students in UN initiatives.

One such initiative is the UN "Alliance of Civilizations" (www.unaoc.org). It was announced by the UN in 2006 on the initiative of the Spanish Prime Minister, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero and the Turkish Prime Minister Redjep Tayyip Erdogan. One of the main goals of the initiative is to reduce the risk that a "wall of misunderstanding" will emerge between the West and the Muslim world, and to prevent the threat of "conflict between civilizations"; it aims to overcome the separation between the Christian West and the Muslim world following September 11th, 2002 and to activate cultural cooperation on a global scale. Four are the main priority fields of this initiative - youth, education, media and migration.

"Bulgaria is a country with a proven model of ethnic and religious tolerance," said the President of the Republic of Bulgaria, Georgi Parvanov, during the Second Annual Forum of the UN Alliance of Civilizations in Istanbul in 2009. In his opinion, the Balkans which have so far been known as the powder keg of Europe are currently gaining popularity with a new image – that of interaction in the field of culture, such as the cultural corridors between Balkan countries. President Georgi Parvanov proposed the creation of a fund aimed to help young people to get to know religious and cultural differences and to find the path to cohesion.

On May 16th and 17th of 2009, in Sofia, we held the Twelfth International Scientific Conference of the UNESCO Chair "Communication and Public Relations" in the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication of the Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski, under the topic "Communication and civilizations", dedicated to the Alliance of Civilizations. The conference was organized jointly with the UN Development Programme in Bulgaria and the European Journalism Training Association (EJTA), with the support of the Foreign Ministry of the Republic of Bulgaria. The conference involved theoretical discussions, a round table between journalists and PR experts, a doctoral seminar and students' atelier.

Within the Conference we also held the Third working meeting, bringing to fruition my idea (Zlateva, 2008: 60-61) for creation of a network of chairs and experts in communication from the Balkan states – BALKANCOM – which will cooperate, among other tasks, for the regional realization of the

Alliance of Civilizations by means of initiatives and interdisciplinary scientific studies.

   The first steps have already been taken. But our common task henceforth is to study communication in the digital world in all its aspects, and to train young generations in the spirit of tolerance, empathy and loyalty to the ideals of humanism and peace.

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