

Kluwer Mediation Blog

Communication in the WhatsApp Era

Andrea Maia (Mediar360 – Dispute Resolution) · Tuesday, January 8th, 2019

On first of January 2019, Jair Bolsonaro became Brazil's 38th President. After years of economic, political and even a social crisis in Brazil, the right wing politician has the mission of unifying the country after the most polarized elections in our history. Similarly to what is happening in other parts of the world, the new Brazilian President and other high officials are using social media not only during the campaign, but during their time in office. Bolsonaro and a handful of first tier politicians are using WhatsApp, Twitter and other Medias, to communicate directly to citizens. In the first week of this new administration, the ministry for Human Rights, Mrs. Damares Alves, was recorded on a WhatsApp video that went viral. She was surrounded by many of her supporters and said that from now on "all boys would wear blue and girls would wear pink, in a new era for Brazil", The controversial video was received by the public with strong opinions from both supporters and critics of the government. Days after, she stated that it was only a metaphor, an intent to protect Brazilian children from the so called "gender ideology".

As a mediator, I believe in the role of communication as a tool to build stronger and healthier relationships and I started to reflect about the impact of Mrs. Damares Alves statement , as it was debated during a week in the newspapers and general media.

As Livia Levine states in her paper **"Encouraging Trust and Cooperation in Digital Negotiations"**: "one of the most important issues in modern society is how society modifies the way in which its members develop relationships and foster cooperation in the face of new communication technologies"- "Trust and cooperation are critical aspects of society's functioning well, and the focus of contemporary society is shifting to digital communication and interaction. "

The political world is per se a world of compromising different interests. Traditionally, this is made through institutional paths, such as public hearings, commissions, political parties and all the political negotiations that happens at the congress. In our internet era, with twitter and WhatsApp, communication becomes less of an institutional task and a more personal one, with politicians writing directly, with little or no filters by journalists, media training or assistants. The benefits to this new model are easily listed: it is faster, dynamic, without bureaucracy. A direct way to talk to the people, without intermediation. However, this new way of communication asks for a more careful approach from our leaders.

In my point of view, several nonviolent communication (NVC) skills could be useful for our leaders in this digital era scenario . For instance, practicing a more empathic listening combined with a more assertive way of expressing will help deliver a more clear understanding of the

message, which brings legal certainty and a more peaceful communication environment. Empathy and assertiveness are not to be confused with weakness. In Marshall Rosenberg's words, "All that has been integrated into NVC has been known for centuries about consciousness, language, communication skills, and use of power that enable us to maintain a perspective of empathy for ourselves and others, even under trying conditions."

As I have written in many spaces, communication in online environments have real life results. When it comes to public leaders and politicians, they must take into account the responsibility they have as public servants. Whenever they post a video on WhatsApp groups or write a simple tweet, they must have the same sense of responsibility they would have if it were an official document. It is very clear that in our days, WhatsApp videos, Facebook comments and any other social media tool are no longer private conversation but a public path of communication with the society, with the weight it brings to it.

During our last elections, many politicians explored our differences, underlining all the differences not only in the policy agenda, but also in core values such as religion and political ideologies and I truly believe that the integration of the New Technologies and the Old NVC Techniques could be a way to ease the path for their communication.

WhatsApp had an immense influence during the Brazilian elections and it appears it will keep its influence in the years to come. Now the elections are over and it is time for the president (and his team) to step up their communication skills and build bridges and connections in order to unite our people around common goals enshrined in our constitution.

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