

## Beyond "liking" and "sharing": the duty of care in disseminating health information on social media

*Más allá del "me gusta" y el "compartir": el deber de cuidado al difundir información de salud en las redes sociales*

*Além do "curtir" e "compartilhar": o dever de cuidado na divulgação de informações de saúde nas mídias sociais*

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### Abstract

Social media has become an ambiguous space for healthcare professionals, oscillating between educational potential and the ethical risks of misinformation. This theoretical reflection study aimed to understand, considering Martin Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology, the ontological foundation of the duty of care in digital health communication. Through an interpretative literature review of the PubMed, SciELO, and Google Scholar databases, the study articulates the Dasein analytical framework to argue that the professional is launched into a digital world as a being-of-care (Sorge). The results reveal that each online act is a way of unveiling this being, which can occur authentically (as a care project) or inauthentically (as decadence in the anonymity of networks). It concludes that ethical responsibility emerges from the very structure of the professional being, representing a call to authenticity. Training should therefore promote ontological self-reflection, enabling professionals to act on networks not as ordinary users, but as beings whose existence is, in itself, care.

**Descriptors:** Social Media; Health Personnel; Principle-Based Ethics; Qualitative Research; Health Communication.

### Resumén

Las redes sociales se han convertido en un espacio ambiguo para los profesionales sanitarios, que oscila entre su potencial educativo y los riesgos éticos de la desinformación. Este estudio de reflexión teórica se propuso comprender, a la luz de la fenomenología hermenéutica de Martin Heidegger, el fundamento ontológico del deber de cuidado en la comunicación digital en salud. Mediante una revisión bibliográfica interpretativa de las bases de datos PubMed, SciELO y Google Académico, el estudio articula el marco analítico del Dasein para argumentar que el profesional se lanza al mundo digital como un ser de cuidado (Sorge). Los resultados revelan que cada acto en línea es una forma de revelar este ser, que puede ocurrir de forma auténtica (como un proyecto de cuidado) o inauténtica (como decadencia en el anonimato de las redes). Se concluye que la responsabilidad ética emerge de la propia estructura del ser profesional, representando una llamada a la autenticidad. Por lo tanto, la formación debe promover la autorreflexión ontológica, capacitando a los profesionales para actuar en las redes no como usuarios comunes, sino como seres cuya existencia es, en sí misma, cuidado.

**Descriptorios:** Medios de Comunicación Sociales; Personal de Salud; Ética Basada en Principios; Investigación Cualitativa; Comunicación en Salud.

### Resumo

As mídias sociais tornaram-se um espaço ambíguo para os profissionais de saúde, oscilando entre o potencial educativo e os riscos éticos da desinformação. Este estudo de reflexão teórica teve como objetivo compreender, à luz da fenomenologia hermenéutica de Martin Heidegger, o fundamento ontológico do dever de cuidado na comunicação digital em saúde. Por meio de uma revisão interpretativa de literatura das bases PubMed, SciELO e *Google Scholar*, o estudo articula a analítica do Dasein para argumentar que o profissional está lançado em um mundo digital como um ser-de-cuidado (Sorge). Os resultados desvelam que cada ato online é um modo de desvelamento deste ser, podendo ocorrer de forma autêntica (como projeto de cuidado) ou inauténtica (como decadência no anonimato das redes). Conclui-se que a responsabilidade ética emerge da própria estrutura do ser profissional, sendo um chamado à autenticidade. A formação deve, portanto, promover uma autorreflexão ontológica, capacitando os profissionais a agirem nas redes não como usuários comuns, mas como seres cuja existência é, em si mesma, cuidado.

**Descritores:** Mídias Sociais; Pessoal de Saúde; Ética Baseada em Principios; Pesquisa Qualitativa; Comunicação em Saúde.



## Introduction

The phenomenon of digital communication has radically transformed social interaction and the dissemination of knowledge, a scenario in which health professionals are increasingly involved as active agents. If, on the one hand, social media presents a democratizing potential for health education and the construction of a more horizontal relationship with the population, on the other hand, it raises a complex field of ethical and professional tensions<sup>1,2</sup>. In Brazil, where more than 80% of the population has internet access and digital platforms are primary sources of information for health decisions, the work of these professionals in this space transcends the personal sphere, becoming an extension of their practice<sup>3,4</sup>. However, the boundary between individual freedom of expression and collective professional responsibility becomes blurred, often reduced to impulsive gestures of "liking" and "sharing," without deep reflection on the ontological implications of these acts.

In this context, the dissemination of information, advice, or personal opinions about health on social media by doctors, nurses, physiotherapists, and other healthcare professionals can have a direct impact on public perception, treatment adherence, and ultimately, patient safety. Global data warns of the rapid spread of misinformation (infodemic) during events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, in which healthcare professionals were both authoritative voices and, in some cases, unwitting vectors of unverified content<sup>5,6</sup>. In the national context, studies indicate a growing, but still incipient, concern among professional councils regarding online conduct, highlighting the need for a more solid understanding that goes beyond mere regulation<sup>7,8</sup>. The central problem that arises, therefore, is not only deontological, but ontological, namely: "What grounds, in the very existence of the healthcare professional, the duty inherent in the act of communicating in the digital world?"

The hypothesis is that the essence of this responsibility is not found exclusively in external ethical codes but is rooted in the very structure of the healthcare professional's being as one who cares. From the perspective of Martin Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology, the human being (Dasein) is essentially cared for (Sorge), a being thrown into a world with others, for whom responsibility is a constitutive mode of existence<sup>9,10</sup>. The "digital world" thus configures itself as a new modality of being-in-the-world, in which the professional projects themselves. The act of disseminating health information is not an isolated event, but a manifestation (or, in Heideggerian terminology, a mode of unveiling) of Dasein itself in its ontological commitment to care. When this act is performed without an awareness of this foundation, the duty of care is hidden beneath the triviality of the technical tool.

This study is highly relevant academically and socially by proposing a profound philosophical reflection on an urgent practical problem with disastrous consequences. Instead of listing rules, it seeks to unveil the ontological foundation that should guide any future guidelines. The proposed analysis contributes to the fields of Bioethics and

Nursing, offering a critical theoretical foundation for continuing education and self-reflection among professionals, enabling them to access, navigate, and benefit from the digital environment not as mere users, but as responsible caregivers. Therefore, through a reflection grounded in Heideggerian principles, the objective is to unveil the ontological structure of the Dasein of the healthcare professional as a being-in-the-digital-world, interpreting the meaning of the duty of care (Sorge) that underlies their communication actions on social media.

## Methodology

This is a theoretical reflection study, qualitative and exploratory in nature, that adopts Martin Heidegger's phenomenological-hermeneutic approach as its fundamental philosophical-methodological framework. This design is appropriate for investigating questions of meaning and ontological foundation, such as the proposed one, which does not seek to generalize empirical facts, but to unveil the structures of being that enable ethical experience in the digital world<sup>9</sup>. The investigation was conducted through a systematic and interpretative literature review, focused on conceptual analysis and argumentative synthesis.

The data collection for the analysis was carried out between September and October 2024, using secondary sources published on PubMed, SciELO Brazil, and Google Scholar platforms. The following descriptors and their combinations were used, in Portuguese, English, and Spanish: "social media," "health professionals," "ethics," "responsibility," "digital health," "infodemic," "Heidegger," "phenomenology," "care," "Sorge," and "Dasein." Scientific articles, book chapters, and official documents published between 2010 and 2024 that addressed the role of health professionals in social media, digital ethics in health, the phenomenology of care, or Heideggerian philosophy applied to health were included. Theses, dissertations, and materials without peer review were excluded, except for normative documents from professional councils, considered primary sources for the Brazilian regulatory context.

The analysis of the selected materials followed the precepts of Heideggerian hermeneutics, as proposed by scholars such as Figueiredo<sup>10</sup>. The process did not adhere to a traditional content analysis, but to an ontological interpretation, which comprised three interrelated and cyclical movements: prior commitment (Vorhabe), in which there is recognition of the investigated phenomenon based on immersion in the literature on digital health and ethics, which revealed the tension between daily practice on networks and the lack of a solid foundation for responsibility; prior vision (Vorsicht), in which there is an explication of the philosophical framework that guides the perspective, taking the concepts of Dasein, being-in-the-world, care (Sorge) and unveiling as privileged lenses for interpretation<sup>9</sup>; and the preliminary conception (Vorgriff), in which Heideggerian concepts are articulated with findings from scientific and normative literature, in a hermeneutic circle movement. In this stage, data on online behavior (e.g., benefits, risks, cases of infodemic) were continuously interrogated in the light of existential analytics, and the



philosophical concepts were, in turn, concretized and specified for the phenomenon of the "digital world".

The focus of the analysis was to shift the understanding of the problem from deontology (the study of duties and norms) to ontology (the study of being), asking not "what the rules say," but "what the professional should be as a being so that the duty of care does not even become a question." The resulting reflective synthesis seeks to unveil the meaning of the healthcare professional's communicative action as a modality of care. Because this reflection is based on publicly available sources, without the involvement of human subjects, this study did not require review by a Research Ethics Committee. The discussion is presented in an integrated manner with the results in the next section, following the tradition of philosophical-hermeneutical works, in which interpretation simultaneously constitutes the finding and its critical discussion.

## Results and Discussion

The hermeneutical interpretation, guided by the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, reveals that the communication of healthcare professionals on social media goes far beyond a mere technical skill or a leisure activity. Rather, it reveals itself as a fundamental and constitutive expression of their own being-in-the-world, a phenomenon whose understanding requires going beyond the ontic analysis of observable behaviors to reach the ontological structure that enables them. Reflection on the bibliographic corpus allowed for the articulation of three interconnected ontological dimensions that answer the central question of the study: the facticity of the professional immersed in the digital world, the manifestation of care (*Sorge*) as the essence of their communicative action, and the consequent emergence of ethical duty as a call to authenticity, and not as a mere external imposition.

Initially, it is crucial to recognize the launching condition (*Geworfenheit*) of healthcare professionals in what can be called the digital world. They did not choose to be born into an era of hyperconnectivity, but are inevitably immersed in it, a world already constituted by specific meanings, tools, and relationships. This facticity is multifaceted: it includes a technical base governed by algorithms that prioritize emotional engagement and virality, often at the expense of the nuance, precision, and contextualization necessary for health information<sup>1,6,11</sup>. It also includes social pressure and public expectation where one's professional identity, whether as a nurse, doctor, or physiotherapist, is immediately associated with epistemic authority and credibility. Studies show that the public tends to place greater trust in health content when associated with a profile identified as that of a professional, making each post a potential act of influence, regardless of personal intention<sup>4,12</sup>.

Furthermore, this world is marked by infodemic, a state of informational pollution that characterizes contemporary times, especially acute during health crises, creating an environment of urgency and confusion where the professional's voice is simultaneously a potential anchor and a vector of risk for decision-making<sup>5,6</sup>. Ethical guidelines,

such as those established by the Federal Nursing Council and the Federal Medical Council, emerge as ontological responses to this complex facticity, seeking to regulate specific actions<sup>7,8</sup>. However, Heideggerian analysis shows us that such codes, while necessary, operate at the level of the entity (what should or should not be done), without necessarily addressing the more radical question of the being that performs or fails to perform such actions. The risk, therefore, is of a merely compliant, bureaucratic conduct, where the professional "does not show the patient" to comply with a rule, but without a deep existential understanding of the violation of otherness that such exposure represents.

The core of the investigation leads to the unveiling of the communicative act itself as a manifestation of care (*Sorge*), a concept that, in Heidegger, defines the very structure of *Dasein*. Care is not a feeling, but the mode of being of the human as being-in-the-world, always projected in possibilities and in relation to others<sup>9,10</sup>. On social media, each gesture of "liking," "sharing," or "commenting" is, therefore, a way of revealing the professional's own being. Here, one can observe a divide between an inauthentic and an authentic way of existing digitally. Inauthenticity occurs in the mode of decay (*Verfallen*), when the professional allows themselves to be completely absorbed by anonymity and the impersonal dictates of "them" (*das Man*) in the digital world<sup>9,13</sup>.

In this state, action is motivated by the search for immediate validation (likes), by the algorithm's pressure for continuous content, by the uncritical reproduction of memes or simplified information that generates engagement, or by the performance of a personal identity disconnected from professional responsibility. It is the impulsive "sharing" of an alarmist headline about a supposed miracle cure. In this gesture, the *Sorge* (the professional) hides. The professional flees from their most fundamental responsibility, dissolving into the whirlwind of digital advertising, becoming, even involuntarily, a co-participant in the logic of the infodemic that depersonalizes and massifies information<sup>6,14</sup>.

Conversely, authenticity emerges when the communicative act is assumed as a project of care. Existentiality, being the dimension of *Dasein* that is always ahead of itself, projected into possibilities, becomes evident. Communication becomes intentionally guided by a "why" that is constitutive of the professional being: "I am publicizing this vaccination campaign so that coverage increases"; "I am clarifying this myth to reduce harm"; "I choose not to comment on this controversial topic because thoughtful silence is, in this case, the most prudent form of care." This projection towards an end that permeates the act itself (the well-being of the Other, the improvement of collective health) is the concrete realization of care as an ontological structure<sup>10,15</sup>.

In this way, freedom of expression ceases to be an abstract individual right and becomes the radical responsibility of those who unveil the world. The professional, in communicating, is literally bringing to light (*letheia*) an interpretation of health reality for and with others. To authentically assume this authorship is to



recognize oneself as the being for whom one's own being is at stake in each unveiling.

From this articulation between facticity, care, and authenticity, emerges the understanding of duty as an ontological calling. The "duty of care" that titles this study is not primarily an external categorical imperative, but the voice of Heideggerian conscience (Gewissen), which calls upon Dasein to appropriate its most proper being, which is care<sup>9,16</sup>. Professional codes of ethics<sup>7,8</sup> and the risk-benefit analyses<sup>1,2</sup> function as calls to authenticity for the Dasein that is fleeing in the decay of the digital world. They signal, at the ontological level, the situation in which care has been or may be concealed. The practical relevance of this reflection is transformative. It shifts the focus of continuing education from training for compliance with rules (what to do) to a formation that promotes ontological self-reflection (how to be). It implies empowering the professional to constantly question themselves: "Does this post, this sharing, this omission, reveal my caring self or conceal it? Am I projecting myself, in this public sphere, as a being-for-health or am I losing myself in the game of digital appearances?". It is this shift from deontology to an ontology of digital praxis that can found a truly ethical, responsible, and ultimately authentically caring approach to social media.

### Final Considerations

The investigation undertaken, through a reflection grounded in Martin Heidegger's hermeneutic

phenomenology, demonstrated that the question of the health professional's responsibility on social media requires a shift in the debate. It is not merely a deontological problem to be solved with new rules or lists of prohibitions, but an ontological question that touches the core of the professional being. The analysis emphasized that digital communication is a constitutive modality of the caregiver's being-in-the-world, where "duty" emerges not as an external imposition, but as the voice of conscience (Gewissen) that calls upon Dasein to authentically assume its fundamental structure of care (Sorge). The dichotomy between authentic acts (projected as care) and inauthentic acts (decadent in digital massification) offers a powerful interpretative key to understanding everything from the impulsive sharing of misinformation to ethical and reflective conduct. The main contribution of this study, therefore, is to offer a philosophical foundation that lends depth and ultimate meaning to existing ethical guidelines, proposing that ongoing training should prioritize ontological self-reflection on one's own digital existence. Future research could explore, using qualitative methods, how professionals concretely experience this tension between authenticity and decay in their networks, or how education based on this ontological foundation impacts their communicative praxis. It is concluded that acting responsibly on social media is, ultimately, an existential choice for the authenticity of the caring being.

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