



Symposium 2021:

Communication for Social Justice in a Digital Age

Concept note January 2021

Introduction

In September 2022, the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) will gather in Karlsruhe, Germany, amid perplexities, anxieties, and fundamental questions about the way we inhabit the earth, make sense of our lives, live in society, and accept responsibility for future generations.

These questions have been amplified by the global COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences, as well as the climate emergency and manifestations of racism worldwide, which have further revealed structural economic inequality, gender discrimination, and other forms of injustice in our societies and in our world.

The assembly theme – “Christ’s love moves the world to reconciliation and unity” – is an affirmation of the compassionate love of Christ as life-giving power in the midst of the brokenness of this world.

The assembly will have the task to read the signs of the times and to discern precisely the movement of love towards reconciliation and unity in the context of the present state of the world, where the powers and principalities of this world are exploiting and undermining the very basis of life and community.

Among the challenges the assembly will face are the cultural and economic transformations engendered by the ongoing digital-industrial revolution, especially in relation to what this means to be human, and the impact of these changes (by way of fear and insecurity) on the expansion of human freedom and rights, particularly in relation to the rise of “populisms” and illiberal democracies.

Against this background, this symposium will focus on the impact of digital transformation on communities and societies; bringing together research, experiences from different regions and marginalized communities, expert input on economic and political trends, and ethical and theological reflection as a contribution to the assembly of the WCC, and its work with ecumenical partners worldwide, and to identify opportunities to advocate for democratic digital transformation.

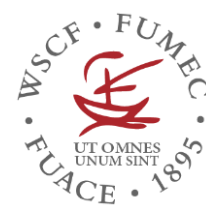
The symposium will place these issues in a framework of communication rights that prioritizes democracy, human rights, and social justice, and that empowers civil society to become effective advocates.

The symposium is being organized by the WCC and the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC), an international, ecumenically linked organization that promotes communication as a basic human right, essential to people's dignity and community, and strengthens networks of communicators to advance peace, understanding and justice. Together the networks of the two organizations will enable a unique global perspective, from grassroots and marginalized communities to media, academia and technology.

Co-organizing the conference are Brot für die Welt, Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), Evangelisches Missionswerk (EMW), and World Student Christian Federation Europe Region.

**Brot
für die Welt**

EKD
Evangelische Kirche
in Deutschland



Location: Offices of Brot für die Welt, Berlin, with three other “hubs” in the Global South

Date: September 13-15, 2021

Format

A pre-symposium process will invite discussion and contributions from eight regions. Working Groups will compile contributions and analysis related to the three major strands of Digital Justice, Public Space and Vision for the Future and prepare for Symposium sessions and dialogue. The Symposium itself will have limited face to face groups and wider digital participation; an estimated 20 people will meet in Berlin, connecting digitally with “hubs” of physical gatherings in other regions along with individuals to bring over 120 additional active participants.

The pre-symposium process, as well as the symposium sessions themselves and the post-symposium actions, will involve not only the active, global participants but also hundreds more in existing and new networks. The format aims to model inclusion, equity and equality in voices and real-life experiences from Global North and South, with particular attention to the voices and leadership of women and young people.

Symposium objective

To explore the challenges of digital communication with a social justice lens, and to identify opportunities for concerted and collaborative actions with faith communities and among faith, civil society, academic, media and technological organizations.

Background

Communications technology continuously evolves with applications that range from the military to the medical to the social. Its interconnectivity and rapidity create the illusion of 24/7 information and news, instant personal relationships, and multitasking in an ever more media saturated world. Digital technologies are transforming the way we communicate and access information and knowledge.

Particularly through social media, mobile and online communications, people have unparalleled access to information, experiences and contacts. In a world where communication is key to social justice and sustainable development, digital platforms offer powerful tools for justice, education, encounter and understanding.

Yet we have also seen the same platforms used to spread deliberate disinformation and hate. Politically motivated digital campaigns of “fake news” are undermining democratic processes and attacking responsible journalism. Our private data is increasingly requested and collected to tailor our experiences for economic and political purposes. And while digital platforms seem to provide unfettered opportunity for freedom of expression, growing media monopolies threaten a diversity of perspective and opinion.

The overwhelming nature of information and connections available online, combined with new forms of deliberate disinformation, have disrupted previous forms of community and conversation and at times undercut trust and participation in public institutions and processes.

The stakes are high.

Political, cultural and civil society actors are all struggling to respond effectively. What is still lacking is a comprehensive approach, based on social justice, to the challenges and opportunities of the digital age.

The ways digital transformation will impact society include:

- Media viability and independence
- Privacy and freedom of expression
- Culture and education
- Knowledge-based economies
- Political participation and accountability
- Sustainable societies and communities

Against the background of realizing the Sustainable Development Goals, public civic spaces need to be expanded and strengthened through equitable and affordable access to communication technologies and platforms, media pluralism, and media diversity.

Communication Rights and Social Justice

Communication rights mean that all people have unfettered access to the information and knowledge essential to democracy, empowerment, responsible citizenship and mutual accountability, and where all are able to engage in transparent, informed and democratic debate.

While government action is needed, it must be informed and supported by civil society and based on a strong foundation of human rights, social justice and democratic principles.

To counter and control the digital transformation of societies requires an equally transformative movement of people.

Individuals, communities, educational institutions, media agencies, and civil society including communities of faith need to understand the human rights and realities that are at stake and take action to counter destabilizing communication initiatives as well as to promote communication that embodies respect for the dignity, integrity, equality and freedom of all human beings and their communities.

A broad range of sectors will be represented in the discussion, building on WCC's and WACC's wide-ranging networks at the intersection of grassroots communities, ecumenical organizations, civil society, media, academia, and political decision-makers.

A non-exhaustive list of potential participants includes:

- Alongside WCC and WACC; other international ecumenical and organisations (e.g. World Student Christian Federation, World Communion of Reformed Churches, The Lutheran World Federation, Conference of European Churches, All Africa Conference of Churches)
- Churches and church-related organizations and representatives (e.g., EMW, EKD, Brot für die Welt, Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, Church of Sweden, Anglican Church of Southern Africa, Ecumenical Patriarchate)
- International non-governmental organizations working in development, human rights, media (e.g. International Federation of Journalists, Ethical Journalism Network, Deutsche Welle Akademie, Reporters without Borders, Catholic Media Council (CAMECO))
- Academic institutions (e.g. Columbia University; Oxford Internet Institute; Media and International Development, University of East Anglia; Culture of Data Project, University of London)
- International communication rights organizations and networks (e.g. PEN International, IAMCR)
- International multilateral organizations, (e.g. UNESCO, UNHCHR, UN Women, WSIS)
- Political leaders, (e.g. European Union, national governments)
- Technological companies/private sector (e.g. Mozilla, Code for Africa)
- Grassroots organizations (e.g. project partners in the WACC Communication for All programme)

Gender-balance, inclusion and leadership of young people, provision for interpretation, and geographical diversity will be sought.

Expected outcomes

- a) Ethical and theological insights on communication rights in the digital age being contributed to the WCC Assembly in Karlsruhe, Germany, against the background of the assembly theme on the world being moved to reconciliation and unity through the love of Christ.

- a) A communication rights manifesto for the digital age.
- b) A common platform for collaborative action on communication rights for social justice in the digital age and potential advocacy campaign on digital transformation
- c) A diverse, informed, and collaborative network knowledgeable about communication rights and committed to applying them in digital communication spheres.

Expected outputs

- Publication(s) on communication rights in the digital age, selected presentations and commissioned articles
- Feature articles and online resources raising ethical, justice and faith issues of the “digital transformation”
- Livestreamed and recorded sessions from the Symposium available for further participation
- Contributions towards a presentation and training package to be rolled out across networks and constituencies promoting digital media literacy in a communication rights framework.